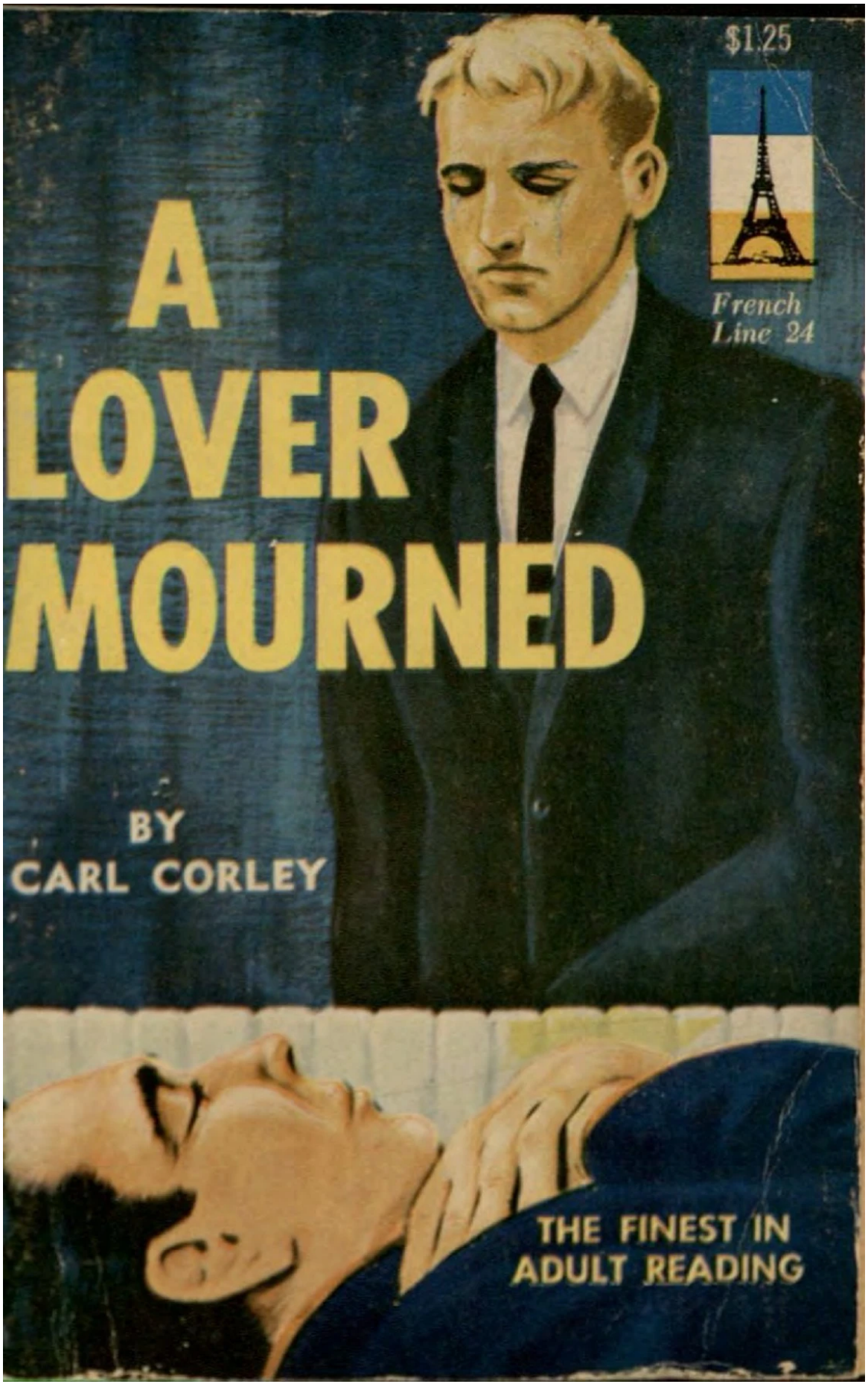
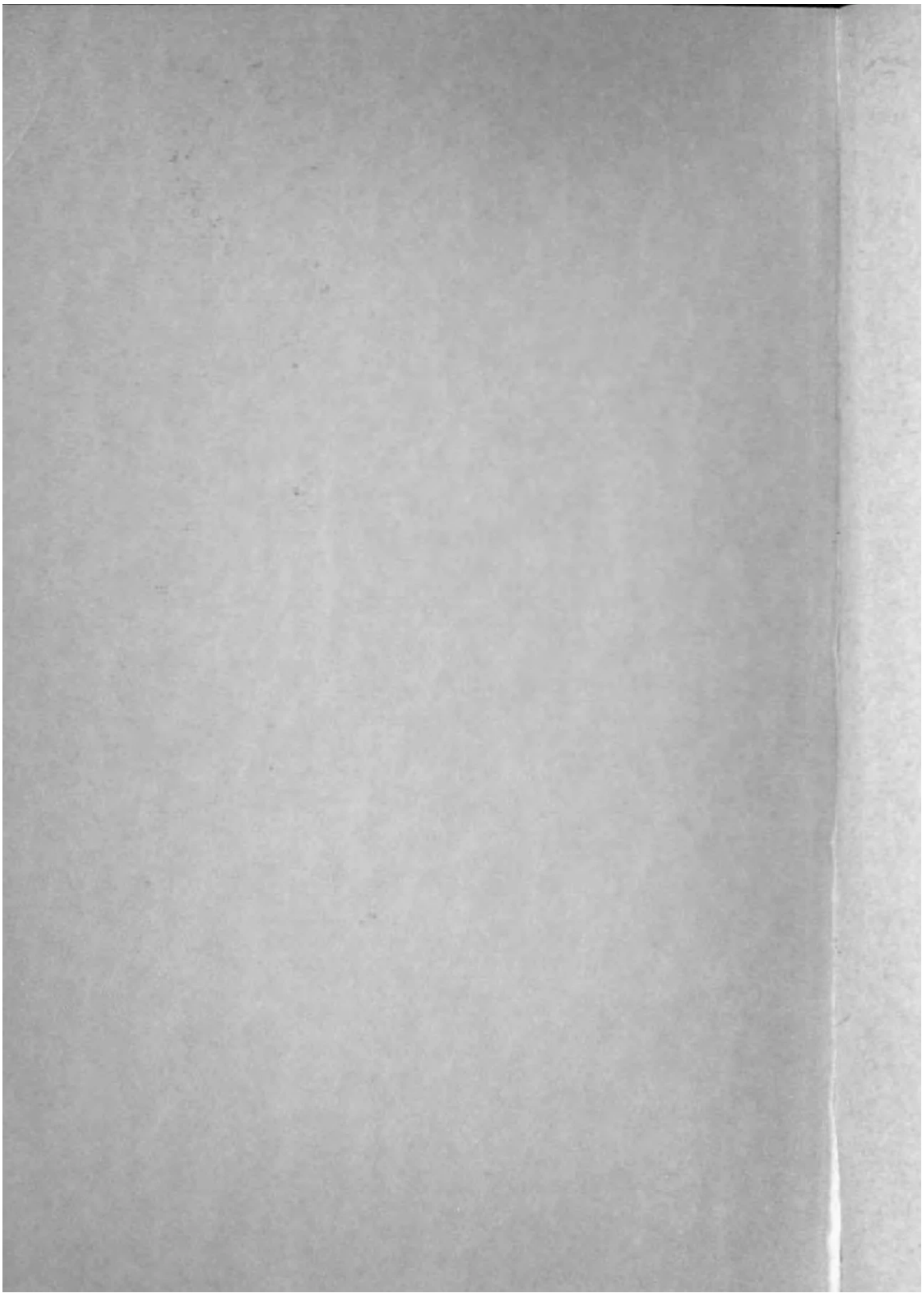

$1.25
French Line 24
A LOVER MOURNED
BY CARL CORLEY
THE FINEST IN ADULT READING



Author's note . . .

I have no wish to offend with improprieties or obscenities, but I do demand my right, as a writer, to show the dark side of wrong, that I may illuminate the bright side of virtue.

. . . Carl V. Corley

A LOVER MOURNED

by

Carl Corley

All characters and situations
in this book are fictitious.

A PEC FRENCH LINE NOVEL

Copyright © 1967 by Publishers Export Co., Inc.

P.O. BOX 20127
San Diego, California (92120)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, without express permission from the publishers in writing.

Printed in the United States of America

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

R3R
E
12mo
#5153

Chapter One

A mallard duck, male, like Deke and I, sliced the shiny water far up ahead of our paddle boat, like a miniature herald in advance of our approach, its colorful plumes like a rosette jewel in the late dusk light.

Its silent path went straight for the sinking sun, with a rivulet of dancing waves spreading out behind it and, with my two long oars sucking water, I followed in its wake, bound for my father's Banjo cabin which hid itself in a bramble of moss, laden, live oaks on the South side of Hoover Lake.

"Bebe, I'm afraid . . . so afraid I'm sick," Deke said to me, lfiting his head up so that he could gaze into my eyes. He was lying back along the two wooden seats, his muscular arms balanced perfectly on port and starboard, his thick, curvaceous legs sprawled under mine where I sat astern. Like me, he was dressed in Bermuda shorts, of some forgotten plaid, emerald interlaced with yellow and bright red, and he looked like a swarthy Scotsman in battle kilts, with his naturally dark complexion, his shock of blonde hair, which lay smoothly over his brow, and his devil-may-care sparkling blue eyes . . . that both laughed and cried, and advertised his love. Everything he felt, everything he understood, every motion he possessed, found their way up through his beautiful body and beamed from his eyes. As now, drugged on pain and fear . . . as I . . . they glowed a dull azure, like the sky pregnant with rain.

Without slacking my grip on the oars, I looked at him lying there in front of me, framed by the dark wood of the boat and the silky waves which swept beyond us, and I realized that his voice echoed my own fears, a fear that went to the deepest places within me, and I said thoughtfully:

"I should never have kissed you at high noon in the dorm hallway." And I added after a pause: "It's all my fault, us being expelled from Hinds."

"It's both our fault," he muttered, letting one

limp hand trail on the water. "We shoulda been more careful." Then he laughed, and his blue eyes laughed too, turning automatically from their drab gray-blue to glittering tinted confetti. "When we get the urge, we get it and hell itself couldn't stop us."

His merry eyes with their revelry, their quicksilver hints of mischief, conjured my mind from the detestable subject . . . our being expelled from Hinds Junior college for getting caught. But then, as for the hundredth time since noon, my thoughts shot swiftly to the Dean of Literature, the deplorable look, almost hideous, on his white putty-like face, a face of so many expressions and he had to pick that one, when he had stopped abruptly in the hall, let out a detached cough until Deke and I had returned our continuance to something of normality . . . and he had come up to us, slow, like an animal stalking its prey, his fat fingers curled around an enormous volume of whatever taste he relished, his jaws sagging, and had stood before our paralyzed forms.

"I've always suspected it," he said, very low but very profound, like a bewigged judge enthroned on a mighty altar. "Hinds is a community college dedicated to building morals, not undermining them. If you persist to carry on your clandestine affair then you will have to exile your debauchery beyond the boundary of this campus, beyond the pure eyes of your obviously superior colleagues." He paused,

grunted like a pig, then went on raucously. "If I had my way, I would place you on public exhibition for all your fellow classmates to see. But, unfortunately I can only expel you, a punishment that does not live up to your crime, the shame you have brought upon Hinds. For you will go on in your private world keeping your tryst with destiny, where the rules of this college and even law cannot halt your perverted tastes. But . . . " he paused in thought, his lachrymose eyes invading us like search-beams. "Perhaps your parents . . . "

"You're not going to tell them?" Deke asked, flinging his hands wide in the age old gesture of appeal. "Burn us at the stake, but don't tell our folks! Bebe was only making a joke with me, teasing, honest, Mr. Bickerton. Our parents are too old south. They'll make a mountain out of a mole hill."

Mr. Bickerton smiled in a way that made me want to hit him.

"Mid-Victorian . . . eh?"

We had both nodded.

"Ah . . . that may solve our little emotional problem," he had said, as if he was settling the pathos of the world. "The proper tonic for the proper ailment. He then gave us a despicable look; a gaze capable of instilling me with shame and humiliation, a look that I would remember, and cringe under the memory of it, for the rest of my life. "Pack your

things. Be prepared to vacate the campus at the close of the last period. I will contact your parents immediately. If Hinds does not eliminate evil, then it pollutes itself from within."

Those words, his voice, the shame, added to the terror, 'if my parents should hear!' had swam in my brain and, like Deke, I was sick on fear, that nauseating dread of tomorrow.

"If . . . if only we had done something . . . to deserve being expelled," I said meekly to Deke, who leaned further back in the boat, as if to catch the last precious rays of the sun on his shining, naked hide. "Then I wouldn't feel so bad, so ashamed."

Deke sat up in the boat, stroked back his sandy hair with a wet hand, and eyed the darkening horizon dejectedly.

"That old sissy britches, Mr. Bickerton!" he cried defiantly, his eyes tormentingly sad. "As if it is a crime because we . . . er like each other so much." He looked directly at me. "Can we help it, Bebe? Can we help it if we think more of one another than we do anybody else in the world?"

I shook my head. I knew, profoundly, from the deepest part of me, that neither of us, could help or disarrange the feeling one had for the other. We had lived here in Mississippi so long, our entire lives actually, in the little country town of Brandon, the county seat of Rankin, our parents the best of friends,

our homes nearer to the other's than any other homes in the community. It was only natural that we had liked each other, with no sisters or brothers to keep us company, to grow up with, our neighbors far distant, so we had instinctively clung to one another, growing up, playing in the woods, the fields, swimming, riding our horses, fishing and hunting, all the things other boys did together . . . with one exception . . . our mutual affection. In time, it had grown so strong, so self-imposing, so overwhelming that we excluded all the rest of the world, in favor of ourselves.

We were men, full grown to maturity physically, and I considered this thoughtfully as I gazed in nervous wonder at Deke who sat so near me in the wobbling boat, the last rays of an Indian summer's sun glazing off his smooth bronze chest, playing with golden caresses down the length of his thick thighs and hairy legs. Though we were small of stature, both not over five feet three, we were not slack nor soft. We had been country reared, brought up to care for ourselves, to think, to react, to respond as other country folk, and to be given the opportunity to learn, that curious eagerness in all those Southern born and Southern reared. We had not lacked, for both our parents were moderately wealthy, college graduates and capable of coping with any problems imposed on them by their children . . .

At least . . . I thought . . . up to this afternoon.

But tomorrow looked grim.

"I hate to go home," Deke said, as I guided the boat into shore. "What will mother and daddy think? Oh, my God! What will they think?"

He sounded as though someone had hit him in the pit of the stomach, he let out such a deplorable sigh, and he seemed to cow under the blow of his own words. He was as miserable as I, and we both showed the impact of our strain, in everything we said, in every gesture we made.

Nervously, I tied the boat up at the small, molded plank wharf, and we stood gazing for a doleful moment at the little Banjo cabin my father'd had constructed years ago, as a retreat, he called it, from the humdrum of the work-a-day world. It set on a little Bermuda grassed rise, completely submerged in low black limbs of live oaks and gnarled gray streamers of moss, like a movie set for some ghostly film, or one of those Tennessee Williams tragedy's where the decadent South seemed the only worthwhile characteristics to stage. The two tiny windows, facing the front, stared at us from reflective blind eyes, echoing my own deep unhappiness, my sudden feeling of being lost; even with Deke beside me, and it did not appear the so welcomed retreat Deke and I had so desperately sought on the aftermath of our exemption from school.

"Can we stay here tonight, Bebe?" Deke asked

simply, his voice low, nervous, his blue eyes devouring it as if for the first time.

"We've got to go home sometime and face up," I said, and with an unexpected maturity, despite the fact that Deke was two years older than I, and usually lead the party, made the decisions, and gave expected advice; the one who was always calm, and majestic; the protector.

"I just can't go home tonight," he whispered, his face a mask of worry, like an actor in an ill-starred drama. "It'll be a row all night, and I'm not up to listening to one of mother and daddy's performances . . . not after today . . . after old fat Bickerton."

"Whatever you want to do," I agreed. "But you know now what they will think we are doing here at night, all night, if Mr. Bickerton has called them, and we do not show up. They'll know we're doing what we're doing."

He scratched his head, peered at me crestfallen, then gave a slight shrug. "You're right." The glow in his eyes deepened like a bottomless lake, a lake with dangerous under-currents. "Come to think of it, everywhere we go now, everything we do, they'll be suspicious of us . . . of our being together and . . . make it worse than what it really is. We're in a mess. That old Bickerton would have to throw a wrench into our lives . . . couldn't leave well enough alone . . . so holier than thou!"

I tried in vain to picture life in the future without Deke: being with him, doing the things we did together, it was impossible. There was no life, if he could not be a part of it, a great part.

"Maybe we're just building things up," I said. "Maybe Mr. Bickerton didn't even call our folks. Maybe he was just bluffing. We're both scared, and things look worse when your scared."

"We've still got our expulsion from college to cope with," Deke said factfully. "They're going to wonder why we just came home in the middle of a term, then didn't go back. We've never been up against anything like this before, which will cause them to think the worst."

I remained silent for a moment, wordless, as I considered what he had said. In truth; neither he nor I had ever been in any trouble . . . model students, to a degree. We had always made excellent grades, had gone out for track, swimming, and steeplechase. And we were both clean and polished; that middle class polish, we utilized our good upbringing, our natural good manners; were courteous, polite and neither smoked nor drank; and had never, as so many country boys, taken up the habit of profanity. Not that we were delicate, softies. We were not. We were as tough as any of the other rural boys our age, or older. We could shoot well, set our saddles better than most, and out-did them all in swimming and

calisthenics. Our parents would be concerned over our twist of conduct, and greatly. In fact I was scared stiff over what they might do to me for, though I was an only child, they had always been strict, to the letter, their monotonous rules obeyed. I had grown up schooled to obey them, and I had learned early that their rules were intended for practice, and not to be ignored. I learned too that life was kind to me if I obeyed them, that perfect harmony was reached and maintained if I did and reacted to what they imposed on my youth as right. Frankly, I had never questioned them. I knew they were right, knew their rules were applied only through their deep love for me and for my welfare, and my preparedness for the society into which I would flow.

It was the knowledge of this which caused me such turmoil of mind. Had I ever caused them any trouble, any worry, this thing with Deke and I would have been merely one more fault findings in my many faults. But this was something new, something definitely awesome, both to me and to Deke, and which momentarily for us made of life a living hell. We could already see the gates of purgatory swinging wide, could feel the flames.

"There is only one thing left to do," I said slowly, as if by my words I was signing our death warrants. "And that is...go home prepared to face the worst."

"And thank God it is no worse than it is," he lamented gravely, then all was quiet, as if we stood on the little wharf awaiting our sentence, the sloshing of the waves against the moldy pilings was like the lapping of the waters of Hades on the boat of Charon as he rowed us into the depths of the underworld.

We lingered, hypnotized by our predicament, petrified by something we could not altogether understand. And what we both did understand was this: That something was happening to our pleasant tenor of life, something dark and sinister, something that was crowding in on our revelry, our freedom, our happiness; something that threatened, like dark clouds that threaten, and at the same time, prophesy an oncoming storm. We knew; as we stood close on the dripping wharf, felt, sensed, that our life was taking on a drastic change, and that our old life, the freedom of it, the anarchic passion of it, was over.

In silence, muted, deft, we clung to the other with our slow, hypnotic gaze, reached out and touched with the magnetic pull of our emotions, dragged at each other like slaves bound to each others arms and legs. Had we ever been close during our brief lifetime, we were closer now. That we had committed a crime ...if it could be termed in any sense a crime... theft of caring for each other, which, perhaps, is the most damnable crime of all. The innocent cast together, alone, amid the envious world of the profaned,

the despisers, like Mr. Bickerton, who had long since lost his innocence, and could no longer endure it in others.

We both sat down in the soft sandy patch which mounted up along the lake shoreline, our minds locked in deep thought, paining us individually, yet from the same purpose. Each was alone in his awesome meditations, but bound. And because of this, I could have no more stirred from his side than a moth from ember.

Deke lay back in the soft nest of sand, his hands behind his head, his gaze lost in the vastness of the dusky sky, with silence forever descending down upon us, as we put off longer and longer the dreadful idea of going home.

"I never thought all this would end," he whispered, his voice so low, so overflowing with passion I could hardly hear him. "I thought you and I would go on caring, being together always. Now, I don't know." His whole body shuddered. "Now, it scares me to death."

I turned and looked at him, leaning my body so that my weight shifted to one elbow.

"We cannot help the way we are, the way we feel about each other. We never asked to be this way. We were born through no doing of our own, and we have cared for one another through no direct action on our part. It just happened. Deke . . ."

"But you know what people are going to say, Bebe, if it leaks out. Holy sex! If that kooky old Mr. Bickerton blabs, and he will, we'll be regarded as fruity. And God knows, I loathe that phrase."

I nodded, for I hated it too.

"Our only hope is that he doesn't blab. And I know our folks won't. They'll be too busy trying to hide it from everybody. They'll be tight as clams. Mama hates gossip as much as she hates cussing, and you can bet one thing, whatever she does to me, whatever she says, and she will say plenty, she'll keep her mouth shut about it in the presence of everyone else. She works too hard at keeping the family respectability, to let it be ruined by spreading gossip."

"I wish I could say as much for my mother. She's okay until she gets mad or upset, then she starts spouting off to everyone. Has to relieve that tension which builds up inside her, somehow. A frustrated woman, as you well know. Remember last Easter, at that lawn party at the McRay's farm? Remember how she jumped down daddy's throat about him coming home from work late the night before . . . just because she had spilled ice cream on her new dress and it had gotten her upset?"

I nodded, my thoughts instantly rethreading time.

"She just can't hold her tongue when something is crowding her."

"But with you, maybe she will react differently. She's always bragging on you, so, she's not likely to say something to put you down in public."

"But I'm still scared, Bebe," he muttered, gazing at me with those forlorn eyes of his. "Not for what our folks might do, what they might say, but what might happen to us. I don't want anything to ever come between us, no matter what happens. I want us to stay as we were, inseparable. God! I do want that!"

"Nothing is ever going to come between us," I assured him, my gaze firmly on his. "Nothing can change that."

"Like Romeo and Juliet."

"No," I corrected him. "Like Bebe Tarver and Deke Baxton."

Silence invaded us again, and we both lay in the soft, reassuring sand, our thoughts locked in the wondrous world of the ither, that magnified beauty beheld in everyone who is in love.

I lay and listened to the soothing sounds of approaching night, as if waiting for the Gods to finish their conference and decide what to do with us, whether to bless or to curse. I lay and listened to the activities of nature, the very substance which had first brought Deke and me together, that power-

ful invisible something no-one can understand nor name: the quiet lapping of the muddy water on the sagging wharf, the sighing of the moss burdened limbs as a steady breeze threaded its way among the laden branches; a cricket, the throaty intonations of a frog, twigs snapping, the wind in old dried leaves, the rattling of pine cones one against the other, the tingling of dried reeds, like ancient chimes, the far off sound of a train tearing its way through the night, the barking of a dog, the dropping of persimmons from a nearby tree, their dull thud like fatal drops of fresh blood.

"We've had some good times together, haven't we?" Deke broke the maw of laconism, calling, like demons calling up the dead old world together, which seemed cleft now, something so desperately far away, so out of reach we could only reach out for it, grasp for it with the clawing tendrils of our hearts, something vast and beautiful we had lost, and would lose forever.

"Too good," I murmured, after a hesitation of thought. "Maybe that is why we may have to give it all up. Too good to really last."

"When you say . . . give it all up . . . you sound so final, Bebe, like we'll never see each other again, like we'll never touch, like fate or something like fate has sentenced us to a life apart."

I tried to weigh the possibilities.

"I'm just trying to consider everything . . . what could happen, the worst, if the worst must come."

There was a long stabbing silence.

"What could be the worst?" Deke asked gravely.

"Our separation," I answered, without having to think. There could be nothing worse than this. To live without Deke . . . unthinkable!

He let out a troubled sigh, a sigh which seemed to spell out our doom, a benediction to our doom.

"Don't even think it . . . let alone say it."

"It's something we may have to face, Deke, and you know this. We've lost out at school, and, with the war going on . . . who can say where we will be in the future."

"I had forgotten about the war . . . holy battle-stations!" The silence became more accute, a silence so intense I could hear his uncertain breathing, as if he labored painfully to draw into his tortured lungs one last breath of the fresh night air, the autumn fragrance. "But . . . but, surely the Germans can't hold out much longer, and the Marines have bottled up the Japs in the south Pacific. Father keeps saying I won't ever have to go."

"As long as we're in college," I said, but adding little with which to comfort him. "The minute we quit, or get expelled the draft board will snatch us up like a duck on a junebug."

"We could enroll at State . . . become Civil Engineers."

Unintentionally, I jabbed him a second punch below the belt.

"We couldn't until second semester . . . until after next Christmas. By that time the draft board could get us."

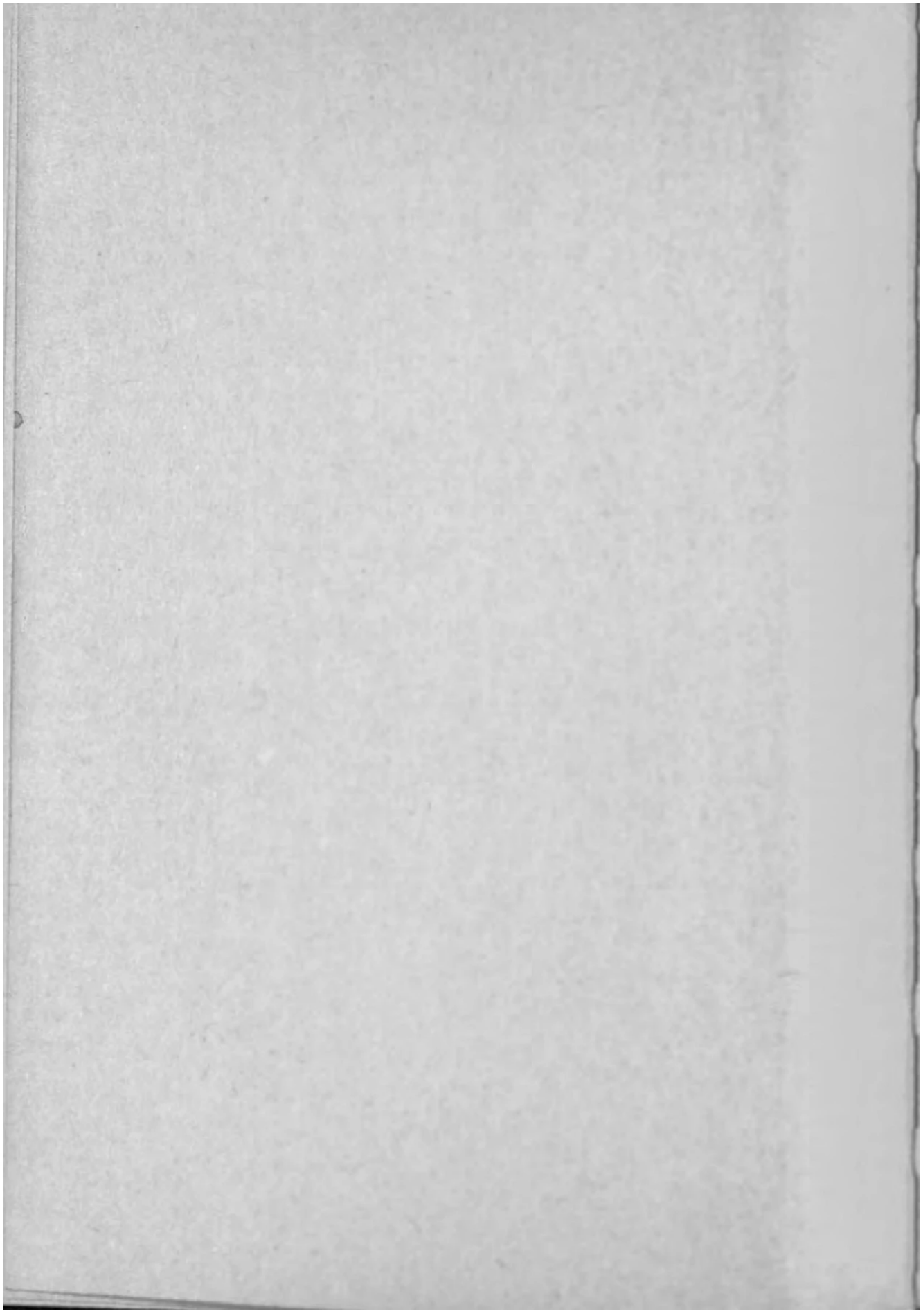
He sat up on one elbow. The wind lifted his hair where it fell over his brow, and he looked like Paris doomed to the lower world.

"You sure rub iodine on the wounds, Bebe," he rasped sardonic.

I explained to him from the depths of my heart.

"I don't mean to be an antagonist, Deke, but I want us both to go home with everything in full view, so that no matter what happens we can be ready to do whatever is necessary to keep from being separated. We've got to be a head and tail ahead of everybody else."

"You're right," he agreed, and in the remoteness of the night I could detect his gaze burning through the darkness. "We've got to be ready. With every trick in the book, we've got to be ready for whatever comes."



Chapter Two

Then, as if being summoned, we got up from the sand, and went slowly up the little winding path to the Banjo cabin, the ghostly trails of moss above our heads like pale fingers grasping for our thoughts. Dry leaves, lifted by the night wind which came off Hoover lake, played about our naked feet and legs, and the dankness of fall, of night, of the humidity from the water, crept into us, enshrouded us mysteriously, telescoping our present despair.

While Deke lit a fire in the hearth, I went back to the kitchen and whipped up a short order meal.

My mother always kept a supply of canned goods, coffee, tea, sugar, things like that which didn't easily spoil, for my father whenever he wanted to fish, to hunt or just to be alone, coming ever so often to tidy things up for him, though she never used the cabin for her own leisure or with my father, or as an outing for herself or her women friends. She loathed the place, using the continuous excuse that she detested the smell of fish, and could not endure being in on a kill whenever my father shot a deer, a rabbit or a squirrel. But mostly, I believed she did not like it for the Banjo cabin was to her a rival. It took my father away from her, a retreat where he could be himself, where he could think, and she was jealous of all these preoccupations within him she could not share in part.

But I had always loved the Banjo cabin... named thusly when an old darkie came and played a banjo while father and the carpenters were building it... and because it seemed to hold a lot of my father within its pine paneled walls, much more than our house did. The house was mama. The Banjo cabin was daddy. Too, I loved it because it was mine and Deke's retreat, our gingerbread cake from Hansel and Gretel, our land of Oz, our castle of King Arthur, our woodland cave from A Midsummer's Nights Dream, our toadstool from The Wee People, and much later our sepulcher, our temple of love. It

had been many things to us, from our early boyhood up to our presently second term in college . . . lately, our pad. Mostly, our limbo of complete freedom, complete privacy, our place of exile from the rest of the world. Not that we had ever felt guilt, or shame from our relationship. It was too divinely wondrous for that. A thing so utterly profound and beautiful could not be endangered by the profane invasion of shame, guilt, despair. This was our heaven. Hell belonged to that other world . . . that world in which we moved like shadows.

As well, we never considered our interest in each other in any way strange. That would come later . . . much later. Up until this afternoon we had been too blinded by the overwhelming devotion one harbored for the other to view our love from a proper perspective. Today, Mr. Bickerton had taught us to see. Naturally, we had heard of wild revelries elsewhere . . . what high school or college boy hadn't in these anarchic times, with world war two in full swing, and morals loosened to coincide with the era . . . had heard of young boys answering calls to a certain witchery with older men, to the pairing off of couples, boys who listened and obeyed those siren songs . . . any song that would hurl them out of their boredom, that would ease the tension, bow to the morals the war was imposing upon their youth, their careers. But none of these alien things, these uncanny duels

of caprice, interested Deke or me. For these things were not of our world . . . us together . . . no more than that world was a part of us which dictated to social forms, church, deaths, marriage, children. We were on the high seas, floating free of all this, detached, regarding our life, our world as something adrift . . . something unapproachable by anyone or anything except ourselves.

This was the way we had wanted it. As an animal is different from a human, even a domestic animal, so were we different from our counterparts, alike in looks only, and there it seemed our similarity ended. We were as aliens in an alien land, they not speaking our language and us not speaking theirs. We were out of step with the world, so to speak. The world marched to a drum cadence our ears, our emotions could not comprehend, for we listened to a different kind of music, and stepped to its beat, its wild and wondrous rhythm. A rhythm as impending, as deep rooted as nature itself, filling us with constant awe, leading us on with its starving inadequacy never quite fulfilled by anyone or anything except the other.

It was a life we had to live, feeding upon it with deliberate impetus, a fountain from which we had to drink, gorging our beings, our cup to overflowing. Long ago we had listened to its fatal music, had become awed, spellbound, swept up in its celes-

tial tides, its silver fluted sounds, its pompous madness, its ebullience, and now, our senses were deft to any music but this.

We were what we were. In addition, we were as normal as raindrops, or teardrops, and just as fatal, as fugitive, as ephemeral as both.

When I finished preparing our meal, loading it with cups of steaming coffee on a Japanese tray an uncle in the Marines had sent my father from Guam, I found Deke curled up on the old cowhide sofa before the fire, thumbing through a ragged copy of Audubon's bird paintings.

"I should be ashamed of myself for letting you do all the work," he said politely, swinging his naked legs down from the arm rests and laying the book aside. He hurriedly cleaned ash trays and various articles from the coffee table and I set the tray down between us.

"Nonsense," I cried, handing him a clean napkin about which his eating utensils were wound. "I feel better when I'm doing something for you... makes me feel more wanted...needed."

He looked up from his plate, his blue eyes suddenly shot with flaming light, and a smirk clouded his emblazoned, firelit face.

"Do you have to have something else to feel wanted, needed?"

"No, not really... just today I guess." And I

said this with all my stored up convictions. "I need to be reassured I have you, even if I have lost everything else."

His steady gaze remained on mine, and it was a puzzled gaze, almost quizzical.

"You feel you have lost everything, on account of what happened today?"

I tried to give him a plausible answer, one in which we both must believe, must adhere to, must count on, if we are to have a future.

"Deke, not everything. But maybe a lot, more than we think, more than we let ourselves realize right now." I pause, giving myself time to chew the Chicken A La King I had heated from a can. "I'm afraid we may lose our way of life, you and me, the things we love to do together, what we represent among ourselves. It could end, or get so bad, with everyone finding out, that you and I, the way we might react, may destroy what we love most."

"How?"

"Do you remember that boy when we were still in high school . . . what's his name . . . er Mecham Clay?"

He nods.

"What about him?"

"Remember, they caught him and the football coach down at the toilet. The coach was zipping up his pants when the captain of the team walked in.

You know what a scandal that caused. And that poor kid. All the blame fell on him . . . after the coach lied out of it, said he was just putting Mecham to the test, to find out if he was really er . . . like that, that he had been suspicious of him for a long time and wanted him away from the rest of the boys."

That kid should have known better . . . in broad open daylight, and in the men's toilet to boot."

We did the same thing."

"Not that!"

"I mean, we kissed in broad open daylight, right in the hall!"

"Oh!" he gulps, his eyes dark, sad again, his face radiating fear.

"And look what happened to him. He immediately joined the service to save face, and was later killed on Guadalcanal. If it hadn't been for meddling tongues, cruel gossip, he might never have had to enlist, and would be alive today . . . like Coach Lindsey who condemned him."

"But, Bebe, he was truly guilty of that, and we are not. We were doing nothing."

"But we could have been caught, and could still get caught."

"You want us to stop?"

I shook my head. I couldn't stop. God never willed that I have that much power, that kind of inner fortitude.

"I just want us to be more careful," I said, and with grave seriousness. "If we aren't, then we may be forced to stop."

He lifts an eyebrow in disdain, and his brow becomes a map of tiny wrinkles. Fire leaps from his eyes, and I notice the veins in his stout neck stick out like cables grown taut by some irresistible force. His lower jaw is set, stubbornly, and his nostrils flare, like a horse alerted to danger.

"Nothing or no one is capable of stopping us, Bebe. We have something rare, so rare I honestly believe it can never be duplicated with anyone else, if something should happen to the other, or if we ever decide to break it off. I'm older than you, Bebe, and I know the love of a girl, the same perhaps as you, but being older I know more readily what I want, what makes me the happiest, and I am not going to throw all this away just because a kooky professor misconstrued something clean and beautiful into an incident of atrocity. We have our lives to lead, the same as everyone else, the same as our folks, as that old fat prof, and we must live it ourselves, the way nature intended that we live it. I have never considered what we do low of morals, indecent, trashy. We merely make each other happy, and if that is evil, or wrong, then all the teachings of Jesus were wrong. There are other places to go, Bebe, other colleges we can attend. We do not have to

live the balance of our lives apart here in Rankin county, in this one horse town of Brandon. No law, nor jail, nor love of kin can stop me from seeing you, loving you, living with you."

I thought of all he said later, as we lay in bed, the moonlight streaming in on our bodies through the little opened window, and his words, his deep, masculine voice gave me courage, a quiet courage, but a courage and determination of deep undertones, smoldering wrath. Never had my feeling for him been so strong, so self imposed. And never had I longed so desperately to fight back, to defend to the cruelties of the world and his and my right to live as we chose. And all because of what he had said, there in the dim firelight, his handsome face lit with passion and with awe, bloated like a ruby under flame.

"Oh, God," I whispered, prayed rather, as his tousled head lay warm against my naked shoulder, as his strong hand coiled in mine, "Let me keep him always, and I will ask nothing else."

He awoke at dawn, with the cold breeze streaming in through the opened window, chilling us anew. And we had coffee before the fanned up embers in the hearth, its rosy glow like a red lantern over our naked bodies, then went out to the little dark boat moored at the wharf for our dreaded trip home, or to hell!

At the landing Deke stopped for a moment and looked sadly back at the little Banjo cabin dim in the ghostly trees. The red light from the east stained his sinewy body, his old Bermuda shorts, his forlorn face, his melancholy eyes, till he seemed dipped in blood. And he had, in the chill morning on this lonely bluff, the look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of martyrdom.

"This may be our last," he said then, cutting away my heart with his dreadful words, his sobbing voice. And my soul cried: Never! Never!

Light played on the dark water like the mad trails in an abstract painting, as the oars dipped and swayed, our funeral barge, and the world was still in crimson agony, like a dying animal thrashing in his own blood, as we hitched the boat and climbed to the highway shoulder where Deke had parked his little pink Jaguar, its white leather upholstery dim through the little foggy port holes.

We drove out and away from our love nest in muted silence, so gripped with emotion we could not speak, and through the rural countryside, up hill and down valley on that lonely, desolate black-topped road, our path littered with bright fallen leaves, the sound of the humming motor, the soft intonations of the radio, the only meaningful sounds in a dead world.

Deke pulled up to an abrupt halt in front of the long winding drive leading up to my house... once a carriage drive strung with buggies and fringed canopied surreys and sleek walking horses depositing gaily frocked men and hoop-skirted women at barbecues and picnics and dances during that long-gone era before the civil war ...and turned to me with a broken, grief stricken face.

"I can't go up, and face your folks, not just yet. Do you mind very much if I ask you to walk."

"You know I don't," I answered, gathering up my suitcase, my tennis racket, my books.

He got out and came round the car to help me. We were all thumbs, and when we made small talk our voices trembled nervously, and we got into each other's way.

When I had all my things intact, my books and racket tucked under my arms, my suitcase gripped and ready for hiking the long uphill climb, we stood looking at each other longingly.

He took my suede turtleneck sweater, which still lay on the bucket seat, threw it over the back of my shoulders and pulled the sleeves up around my neck lovingly.

He held onto the limp sleeves as he spoke.

"Bebe, whatever happens, hold firm. Remember what we mean to each other. I don't intend to lose you ever... understand?"

I nodded my head. I was too choked with emotion, with fear, with the awesome fatality of it all to speak, to utter one word.

Then he was gone.

I remained for a lonely moment, looking after him, then I moved up the dark dismal drive to the house, and the house itself, peering from the lacework of dense trees, its tall columns luminous, like those of an ancient temple.

Then I went under the tall arch, into the forlorn shadows of dawn, went with sudden heartbreak, and as I did so owls were shrieking in the woods, and the sky was pied with gray and crimson, like bloodstained marble. The cries of the owls were hard as marble too, and of a polished ferocity.

And I thought sadly, linking them with me, my plight, the world that was on my heels, they too would have their prey.

* * *

Chapter Three

Going under the arch, I subconsciously gazed up at the row of lettering . . . Mock Orange Hollow . . . spelling out in scrolls of beaten iron, the name of our home. And it was a befitting name, with the slopes on all sides of the house foamed with the gnarled trunks of mock orange trees, that bastard fruit which yields nothing edible, yet carpets the grass beneath with its bearings, which lie and rot, go back to the dark, rich soil year in and year out.

Burdened with my gear, as heavy as my sinking heart, wobbling to and fro by the unbalanced load,

I move under the dismal shroud of the trees, dark still as a dungeon, and began my steady climb up the drive where the house, grand in this dawn light, gleamed eerily from its pine hill perch.

How strange, I thought, that it looked so beautiful to me now, now that I was in trouble, and automatically sought escape beneath its homey roof. Its value suddenly magnified itself a hundredfold, and I never wanted, nor longed for it more than at this silent moment. It seemed to stand so tall in the soft light, like a Greek temple, it's twenty-eight Doric columns springing from the ground on raised stylobates, up to the roof's eaves, without a second story veranda, which made it all the taller, the more magnificent. The pinkish-orange of dawn picked out its many windows . . . plain, with no Georgian influence, their many small panes reflecting back the light in a multitude of bright streams. Whoever had built this house had a passion for brick, for its entirety, even the enormous columns, were constructed of brick and lath plaster, the mud coming from a deep hole on the side lawn, which now served as a reflection pool, lending the passers-by a double view of its grandeur, like it was suspended in the sky.

The house had been built before the civil war, had served as a hospital when General Grant's army had swept down the Mississippi river toward Vicksburg, therefore had been spared his mighty torch.

It had remained in my mother's family this hundred year aftermath, the DeLany's, being handed down to my mother on her marriage to father, and had been religiously maintained by her fanatical crave to keep it restored, a fanaticism as deep, as personal as her stubborn Methodist religion.

Somehow, I had taken it for granted, up until this moment, when I needed its protection most, its grand rooms shiny with cherished antiques, its bachelor wing where I lived, the vast lower and upper halls, warm in winter, cool in summer, its tall windows letting in the light, the mingled aroma of flowers which foamed over in the lawns, the small octagon shaped summerhouse under the pines which served as my "retreat" and the tall cedar shingled dovecote, kept alive by the constant activity of pigeons going to and fro on the little circular porches affronting tiny homes . . . all this seemed like heaven now, an asylum from my shame, my humiliation, my unnatural despair . . . for one so young.

At the front gallery I rang the chimes, for my mother insisted on locking every door at night . . . she who so loved the Lord . . . and waited, the sound of the chime like a Chinese gong.

My mother finally opened the door, her figure a dark form in its trailing nightgown and robe and, gathering up my belongings again, I went into the dark hall, as she closed the door behind me.

"Going on a trip?" she asked with so sarcastic a tone of voice it should have broken the prisms in the the enormous chandelier which hung so threateningly above our heads.

"You know very well I'm not going on any trip, Mama."

"No . . . you're right. Walter and I never know what you're going to do these days."

Her voice cracked like ice.

My knees shook, and my voice trembled as I said:

"Mama . . . I can explain everything . . . that Mr. Bickerton lied, he . . ."

She lifted a hand to silence me.

"We'll thrash it all out after breakfast. Old Matt is back in the kitchen, so don't say anything until we've eaten. You know how darkies talk."

So we ate in silence, with only casual, nervous talk between us, her mostly about rural affairs, her newly organized poetry club, of which she was naturally president, the latest at the P.T.A, a formal honorary dance for the rainbow girls, erecting a statue in the cemetery at Brandon in memory of the Confederate dead (when so many of our men were getting killed everyday in Europe and in the Pacific Islands, rottening where they fell, unhonored, unsung) telling it all with the air of revelry, with genuine caprice, but fooling no one. Old Matt fussed

over us, especially me, for she had catered to my whims since infancy, kidded me about the coeds at Hinds Junior college in Raymond, tempting me with fried eggs, biscuits floating in melted butter, sausage in season, pancakes dripping with syrup, fruit juice, coffee, milk.

"Yo eats you vittals lak a canary bird," she said, in that pure African accent never quite bred out of the Southern Negro. "Yo think yo in some kind of trouble. Yo little nuff as it is, whiffout yo gwine an starvin' yoself to death."

Nothing passed Matt. In truth, like Deke, I was small of stature, and there was nothing anyone could do about it, not even God. But I was proud of my small physique, and had never felt cheated by the lack of a tall frame and gargantuan poundage. Too, Matt had an eye for trouble. She felt she owned us Tarver's body and soul, and her chastisement was continuous. And when Mama and I had nothing to say to her regarding my being home, my lack of appetite, she comes on strong with:

"Ah knows somethin' is wrong, Mr. Bebe." And to soften Mama and me. "It sho breaks dis ole nigger's heart, if somethin' happen to my baby. Yo gwine to have to go to de war . . . or sumpin'."

"He's just home for awhile to rest, Matt," Mama answered for me, looking dejected, shame-faced that she had to lie in my defense. "As long as he's in

college he won't have to go into the service." And she turned to me, wishfully. "Will you, Bebe honey?"

"He's love sick den," Matt insisted, her senses as keen as any Congo bushman, a keenness of perception unknown to the white mind. "Any boy dat pushes his'n vittals away lak he does, bounds to be in love, or sick, or in trouble, or sumpin'."

"That's it, I'm in love," I answered, with tongue in cheek. I was in love, desperately, maddeningly, but I had no intentions of saying with whom. It was better to let her think I was in love, than to learn that I had been expelled from school. Though Matt was black, a servant, she loved me dearly, and possessed the kindest of hearts. None of us could bear hurting her in the least, and made detours and inroads in our own private lives in order to avoid tampering with her spongy emotions.

"Wiff dat Miss Laurie Jordan?" she beamed, her round, black face, purely African, glowing radiantly. "She sho is a purty little thing, flits bout lak a butterfly. Sho mak some fine chillun wiff her."

Mama looked at me squarely, her enormous eyes rolling, then looked at Matt who busied herself clearing the table.

"Laurie and Bebe are going to be married," she said, perking her lips, lips that always appeared swollen, with or without make-up.

I dropped my fork. It's clang against the hard-

wood floors sounded like a smithy's anvil in the enormous room. I glared at mama. She glared right back at me. I had the odd sensation she was settling my life for me, as she had always done with both daddy and me, and I was not prepared for the settling.

"Lord! Whut happy times," old Matt raved, clapping her two black hands together, as if in prayer. "Us gwine have a wedding in de family. When, Mrs. Carlotta, so as ah can starts makin' preparushin's?"

"Not long, Matt," Mama answered, patting her fat hand. "Soon, real soon, perhaps before Christmas."

Before Christmas! My heart leaped to my throat, and every nerve within me trembled. I was numbed by the impact of her fatal, final words, and my body became as weak as water.

Mama rose from her chair. "Matt, bring up three coffees to the living room directly. Walter will be getting up soon, and we three have things to discuss . . . about the wedding!"

"Yessam, Mrs. Carlotta."

I followed mama down the long dark hall, and into the living room, as if she was a guard with a cocked rifle at trial. She was bent on reaching some kind of plausible conclusion concerning my expellment, and that determination showed itself in every

movement she made, in her every gesture, the glaring light in her eyes, her cracking, icy voice.

She sat down in her yellow silk Queen Anne chair, her arms propped along the rests, her back arched, her head regal, looking so much like Bette Davis in a climaxing moment during one of her classical dramas. I sat down on the other side of the hearth, facing her across the long marble coffee table on which sat an onyx urn filled with artificial magnolias.

The moment had come, the one I had been dreading for a day and a night. I awaited for her verdict.

"Well, Bebe," she began, her eyes like glass. "What's all this about you and Deke and some morals charge?"

"It's all old man Bickerton," I answered, my voice unusually shaky. "He saw Deke and me joking with one another, and he added a lot of his own perverted ideas."

"What kind of joking?"

I told her.

She blinked, her mouth pursed all the more, her head still more majestic, like a queen overlooking, and with disdain, her unpopular audience.

"I'm not surprised," she cooed. "You and Deke have always been too close. It's no wonder this Mr. Bickerton thought . . . things . . . "

"He has no right, saying, thinking what he did," I blurted out, with all my venom I felt toward him.

"He has his right to keep the school in order," she blurted back, her fingers tapping monotonously to silk fringe of her chair. "It wouldn't take much imagination to put two and two together with you and Deke, and come out with the total of four."

"Mama!" I cried, "Are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting nothing, Bebe. I have eyes. I can see. You and Deke spend entirely too much time together. You go everywhere together. You're inseparable. You always have been. Even when you were small, you would play with none of the other neighboring boys, except Deke?"

"I thought you liked Deke?"

"I do like him, and very much, as I like his folks, Barry and Vilma. Walter's and my school chums, actually. I think Deke is a fine boy, a clean, upright young man. But you worship him, Bebe. He is your divine hero, your God — and that is unnatural."

I became a small fury. She was tearing to shreds, like a driven rain against the delicate petals of a rose, everything that Deke meant to me, and I became thwarted with rage that she could make so light, so casual, so mishapen; a thing so beautiful, so wholesome to me.

"I have every right to like him, Mama. He is

the only friend I've ever really had. Yes, I do look up to him, and very much. He has always protected me in a way, always stood up for me. He's been like a Knight with sword and shield, standing between me and the rest of the world, and God knows I've needed that, with no brothers nor sisters."

"You have that . . . in Walter, and . . . in me," she said, as if parents were the answer to all things. "We three have always been very close, as you know. If you needed protection, Walter and I were always there to protect, to solve any problems . . . like now."

"There's no problem, Mama, no real problem," I insisted, my hands out in gesture. "A silly joke turned into something rotten."

"Do you call being expelled from Hinds a silly joke?" Her eyes became enormous pools of light, almost like the eyes of a woman grown insane. "I have spent my life fighting for respectability. The DeLany's have always had enormous pride in family, name, tradition."

"Not to mention religion," I cried, interrupting her. Her eyes fairly snapped.

"What's wrong with religion?"

"You carry it too far, Mama," I answered her, and with surprising bravery. "It's not religion with you, not the adoration of God, the love of Christ, but what you can make use of for yourself. The church to you is wearing a new hat every Sunday,

so the other women will be pea green with envy, and meddling with every organization that some Milsaps graduate pastor invents, and applying your so called religion to our home, when basically you have only one desire . . . and that is to stand out among everybody in Brandon and ten miles around, to be somebody in the community . . . Mrs. Lord, or somebody like that."

"Well!" she stormed, shifting her position. "Now I learn that not only are you . . . strange . . . but your an atheist!"

"I'm not an atheist, Mama, nor am I strange. I just don't believe in the God you pretend to believe in, and I never have, and I never will."

"Well! Since we're on the subject, just what kind of God do you believe in; which seems, now, so contrary to all I've tried earnestly to teach you."

"A pious God, Mama." I paused, building my defense against her, at long last, thwarting my own predicament by magnifying hers. "This house for one thing. You fill it with antiques, even go as far as New Orleans and Memphis if you hear about something there you think you will like . . . worshiping materialistic things, when Jesus said repeatedly: Do not store up worldly goods."

"Oh . . . Jesus said that? Well, let me tell you one thing, and I will skip over sodomy, since its so distasteful a subject. The reason I fill this house with

antiques is my great longing to restore beauty to its natural place. God would approve of that. So would Jesus, for he said something to that effect, let me think, on the sermon on the mountain."

"What?"

"Oh, something about Caesar . . . I'm so upset about you I can't think."

"He merely said render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and that was all."

"That's right. You see. I'm rendering unto the south what is the souths."

"For the south, or for the Delany name."

"I'm proud of the Delany name."

"You're no longer a Delany, Mama. You're a Tarver."

"Don't remind me."

"Mama," I said, choked by her utter coldness. "You know how daddy loves you."

She was silent for a moment, patted her soft hair in place.

"He loves you too, Bebe. He paced the floor half the night. Worrying about you . . . what to do about it."

"I'm sorry, mama," I whispered, gutted with emotion. "Sorry if I've hurt you and daddy, but I didn't do anything. I wish you would believe that. Take my word, for once."

"Bebe," she said, leaning forward in her huge

chair, her brow furrowed with wrinkles. "It's not what we believe that counts. It's what the neighbors believe. If you were born like that . . . you and Deke, I could accept that, and in time perhaps, could sympathize, could and would understand, if not for my sake then for yours. If I thought you and Deke were happy . . . being that way . . . I could live with it, and I think Walter could for Walter is more broad-minded than you think. But this thing is against the workings of society, against respectability, against our laws, and against every principle for which I have constantly fought to keep alive in our family. If we lived in New York, or New Orleans, or even in California, any big city leniency could and would be tolerated. But, Bebe, think! We live in Brandon, Mississippi . . . three hundred people at most, and everybody knows everything about everybody else, and I have no intentions of allowing these prattle mouths to go around saying degrading, shameful things about us, if I have to sell out, all these precious things, if I have to burn this house to the ground, sow the land in salt. I won't have our name degraded! shamed!"

"It can't be all that bad, Carlotta," daddy spoke up, as he came down the stairs and into the living room. He was wearing only his maroon silk robe, and his muscular legs, emblazoned with dark wiry hair, stood out vividly against the bright blood red.

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

To me, he was a handsome and imposing man, hard of body, his head crowned with a thick growth of dark wavy hair, his black eyes having lost none of their recklessness, that hot look of youth, which could still turn the heads of young girls my own age, and caused older women to swoon in his presence... a natural primitive swarthiness obviously lost on mama, who ruled so sternly with her staid laws and her mid-victorian practices. I had often wondered what daddy saw in her to marry her in the first place. I had the idea all his good looks, his dash, his mild-mannered ways were wasted on her, and I was was certain she never, during their entire marriage, ever knew nor understood nor appreciated the tenor of his passion.

"It's bad all right," mama insisted, and she related to him the sordid details.

He sat down in a chair nearest mine, crossed his naked legs, and lit a cigarette, the smoke making a fantastic halo above his head. Mama frowned for she had never approved of his smoking, and loathed the idea of even having an ash tray in the house, always fumigating after the departure of guests, and having Matt instantly wash all the trays and decanters.

"I never liked that Mr. Bickerton anyway," daddy said when she had concluded, filling me with joy that he decided to stand up for my side. "An

50 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

old fuss-duddy, if you ask me. Too sophisticated for me. I don't like sophisticated men. Too I've never trusted an old man that'll wear white socks."

"What's white socks got to do with it?" mama cried, her eyes snapping wildly.

"You can judge a man by the way he dresses."

She gives a slight grunt in disapproval, then goes on, her voice sharp, cutting, final.

"That's all beside the point. We don't care what Mr. Bickerton wears or doesn't wear. He can go around in red silk bloomers for all it concerns us. But what does concern us is Bebe . . . his future, his education, what is best for him, and for us."

"And what is best, my dear?" daddy spoke up, though casually, as if he was asking her what was playing at one of the movie theaters in Jackson.

"Have him marry Laurie Jordon . . . what else," mama answered, as if she was discussing the breeding of kennel dogs. "It will save face. People won't regard him as . . . odd . . . if he is happily married."

"Just like that," daddy put in. "How do you know Laurie wants to marry Bebe, or him her."

"Oh, Laurie does all right," mama snapped, her voice like a broken twig. "Moons after him constantly. Over here half of her time, wanting to go on picnics, to shows, to dances, horseback riding. Everytime she sees Bebe she looks like a calf at slaughtering time. All he has to do is to ask her. She'll come

running. She won't be able to get her panties down soon enough."

"Mama!"

"And Bebe?" asked daddy, cuttingly, and surprisingly.

"Right now, what Bebe wants doesn't matter. We've got to clear our name. Marriage won't kill him. It didn't kill you and me, Walter. We survived, and our good name has remained intact, despite you and Barry."

I glared at her, then at daddy. What did she mean? Despite him and Barry. Barry was Deke's father.

"What about daddy and Mr. Baxton?" I questioned, curious.

Daddy looked round at me, and his dark eyes were dull from pain, and I sensed he didn't want to elaborate on a subject that was still annoying to him.

"Nothing, Bebe," he said gravely. "Something that happened long ago, something your mother won't let die."

"You mean, you won't let it die, Walter. It's still there in you. It will always be there."

"Oh God! Carlotta! Why are you always so righteous?"

She looked very cool, and so dominatingly certain of herself.

"I've always lived by the good book," she whispered reverently, folding her hands neatly in her lap. Mama was not an old woman, as youthful as daddy, but she acted old. "The church, this house, my name, you and Bebe . . . are my life, my whole life."

Daddy shot her an insolent look.

"In that order . . . Carlotta?"

"Really, Walter. You can be cruel at times!"

Matt comes in with coffee steaming on a tray. She attempts at lingering, in order to get in on the conversation, but one glance from mama sends her back into the kitchen, her lips thrust out an inch.

"If we just keep quiet, this whole thing will blow over," daddy advised lifting a cup to his lips. "Like that little girl, what's her name, whose stepfather took her in the barn. It was all over Brandon for a while. Now you hear nothing about it."

"But she was ruined just the same," mama put in, straightening haughtily in her chair. "It certainly did little to help her. She'll never get married. No boy will have her knowing her own stepfather ruined her for life."

"Well, this isn't that bad," daddy still took up for me, and I longed to pat him on the back. "The public quickly forgets. Old men like that Bickerton, who have never married, invent ridiculous tales. Their own minds are warped, evil actually. To the pure in heart, everything is pure."

"Walter, we're not going to just sit and wait for this thing to blow over . . . as you call it," mama insisted dramatically. "I'm going to call Vilma and her and I are going to drive over to Raymond and get to the bottom of it all. I'm going to talk to some people, feel them out, like my sister's boy Randy Meeker, who goes there like Bebe and Deke, get some opinions, then I'll know better what to do, how to cope with this."

Daddy frowned and shook his dark head sadly.

"Carlotta! Be damned! Leave well enough alone. The more you stir in a cowpile the more it stinks!"

She lifted her head, with every ounce of her assumed authority.

"I'm going to settle this, Walter! When I come back from Raymond, if things look as bad as I think they are, Bebe is going to do one of two things . . . he is either going to marry Laurie or join the Army."

Daddy lifted his eyes, gave her stare for stare.

"You mean, Carlotta, that you'd sit there and say you would send your own son into the war, perhaps even his death?"

"I would send him to hell," she remarked finally; fatefully, "if sending him would save our good name."

* * *

Chapter Four

Mama, with Deke's mother Vilma, did drive over to Raymond to see Mr. Bickerton. They spent the entire day. And while they were gone I remained on pins and needles, hopeful she would not find out anything, but dreading the worst. Firstly, I knew Mr. Bickerton, knew that, now he had the ball rolling, he would elaborate, which was his custom. He loved to dramatize, to emote, and this incident served him with enough chewing fodder to make the season worth his efforts. In effect, he was worse than mama over morals, and together they would make quite a team.

Too, I had never liked my cousin Randy Meeker. He was aloof, stuck-up, a city boy from Jackson who felt it, acted it, lived it. He and I had never hit it off. For one thing we both ran track, and he resented my two victories, my shining gold trophy cups which sit in a glass case in daddy's library. And for another, he was sweet on Laurie Jordon, and had succeeded in dating her a number of times. Not that I cared. I didn't. I cared for no one except Deke. But Randy thought I cared, and there lay the damage, the humiliation of my pride.

Mama returned that evening a tempest in a teapot. Mr. Bickerton had been evasive, (naturally he would be in the presence of women strangers). His evasiveness had added further to the mystery, lending seriousness to it, intrigue. On the other hand, Randy had had much to report. He had related that he had seen Deke and me one night parked in Deke's Jaguar. The only pink Jaguar in all of Rankin, or Jackson relatively. What were we doing parked? This information filled mama with speculation. She read aloud quotations from the Bible, in the presence of daddy, Deke and his parents who drove over that night to thrash it all out. Sodom and Gomorrah had been her theme, in all its ancient, gory details. Everything that spoke of damnation, soul rendering, doom. The details were filled with pert adjectives, all the stored salvations that were

mama, and she aped them as she read to everyone's distress.

"Really, Carlotta!" Vilma cried, who was as modern as tomorrow compared to mama's Victorian standards. "I see no use in boring everyone with such debauchery. If Lot and his wives and their companions wanted to live thusly in Sodom that was their business. I see no common sense to all this in reading about something utterly dead and gone. It has no place, no meaning in our day, nothing to do with your Bebe or my Deke."

Mama closed the Bible, her face suddenly sad, tired under the glow of the floor lamp, as if she had lost a battle.

"All right, if you want to deny the good Book."

Daddy and Barry eyed one another, then with sidelong glances to Deke and I who sat side by side on the silk couch, which had always been our habit when our families were together. As during the past at times, daddy and Barry would be in a corner talking, mama and Vilma in another lost in conversation, and Deke and I in another, or at the little summerhouse strumming on a guitar, or listening to records.

"It's not that we deny the good Book, as you call it," spoke up Barry. "But it's embarrassing, to us and mostly to the boys."

"Facts are oftentimes embarrassing," mama said, smirking her lips, sensing her oneness, her minority

of one in her battle of five. "I'm just trying, Barry, with you as witnesses, to impress upon Bebe and your Deke the fatal outcome to people who take the other way of life . . . that's all. I want them to understand that . . . this . . . kind of life leads only to anarchy, defeat, unhappiness, violence, tragedy. Do you want that for Deke? Do you, Barry . . . Vilma?"

"We think we have come to a solution to this little embarrassing problem," Barry said, as I fidgeted nervously, looking at Deke longingly, dreading the outcome, but desperate to get this ordeal over and done.

Daddy asked:

"What's that, Barry."

"I . . . we . . . Vilma and Deke here have thought it all out," Barry began, as he sat down on the arm of Vilma's chair and put his arm around her shoulders. "Our boy is two years older than your Bebe, so naturally he will receive the blunt of the blame, like he was influencing Bebe, or contributing . . . whatever people will call it. I have an uncle who is a General in the Marine corps. He can pull a few rabbits out of the hat. Deke can join, go through his boot training in San Diego, then with my uncle's influence can be made a commissioned officer. The war can't last much longer, the way I see it, and it will do Deke good. The Marines have pushed up a long way in the Pacific, all the way to Guam and

Saipan. They're getting awfully close to Japan itself, so it's doubtful if any more recruited Marines will be sent into actual fighting, and the war is practically over in Europe. Hitler and the Germans are finished."

"But isn't that a bit cruel?" daddy asked, his dark eyes lit with genuine meaning, concern.

"I don't mind, Mr. Tarver," Deke said, and his words were like the bottom falling out of my heart. "If it will make mother and . . . and Mrs. Tarver feel any better, to learn that there is nothing like that . . . er . . . going on between Bebe and me."

I wanted to scream: to hell with mama and Mrs. Baxton, but through some remnants of pride, I held my tongue.

"They can write every day, I don't care," Barry went on, his voice low, almost painful. "And call each other long distance every hour, if they feel like it, just so long as they like each other . . . for the families sakes . . . from a safe distance."

"I think that's a splendid idea," mama said, rising, laying her "good Book" on its little selected marble topped table, one of her most cherished relics from a dilapidated shop on Royal Street in New Orleans. "It's all settled then and, with our Bebe marrying Laurie, the world will never be the wiser. This calls for a drink."

Deke and I are too torn to look at one another, and everyone watched numbly as mama poured wine

into six little glasses and passed them around. When she got to me she smiled one of her rare smiles and said kindly,

"I want you to have one too, Bebe. After all, you're a man now, you and Deke, and men should partake occasionally."

I took the drink then gave her a cutting look.

"Is this the blood of Christ, mama?"

My words jolt her, as if she has been struck, but she recoils magnificently. After all, she has had her way again.

"If you so desire to call it that . . . dear," was all she said.

So, it was all settled. Deke would go out of my life, I would marry a girl for whom I had little if any affection, and the Tarver and Baxton names would remain as white as snow.

* * *

And all too soon the fatal day arrived when Deke would have to say good-bye. That day was the end of the world for me.

"Why . . . why did you consent to go into the Marines?" I asked him, as we sat in the little summerhouse for the last time. We were watching the dovecote, alive now with the silent, white activity of the pigeons coming home to roost. It was dusk,

the most fatal, the most sad part of every day, for things seemed to die, to become swallowed up, to be eaten up in the raveneous cravings of darkness. The darkness too was laying its claim on Deke, painting with its black brush his noble presence in my life, making of him nothing more than an echo, but an echo that would resound and resound in my heart until the last hour of eternity. For what could I do, how could I live, if I did not have Deke? And all because of a simple, innocent little kiss!

"It's the only way out for us," he answered, fidgeting with his hands. "If we persist on staying together, seeing one another, they will become more suspicious. This way, Bebe, I can leave, then, the first chance you get follow me."

"But suppose I can't leave," I cried, as every fiber of my being was being ripped with sharp agony. "Suppose something happens that I will have to stay here. Mama . . . she'll watch my every step."

"Don't you think it about time you . . . broke away from mama?" he said, and his voice was calm, but firm, so firm he frightened me. And, gazing into his eyes, I saw that they were firm too, almost hard.

"What do you mean?" I muttered desperately, for I had never seen him like this, had never heard the sound of his voice speaking other than kindness, affection.

"Bebe," he began, taking hold of my shoulders,

turning my body so that he could find and hold my gaze. "Now that I am going, leaving Brandon, Hinds, I've got to say something I've wanted to say for a long time. Don't get me wrong. I like your mother. I really do. But she's hard, Bebe. Hard, brittle, and she's going to ruin your life, just as she ruined your father's."

My mind became a quagmire, my thoughts floundered, threatened to go under by the inward pull of his words, his persuasive voice.

"Ruined, daddy?"

"Yes, ruined," he answered, the sound genuine, factual. "Did you know that your father and my father . . . er loved one another once, back during their first year in college?"

The breath leaves my lungs.

"Oh God! No . . . I never knew that."

"Well, they did," he went on gravely. "Father told me about it all the other night."

"Daddy and Barry," I lamented sadly, trying to picture them together . . . like me and Deke, doing the things we did, saying to each other the wondrous things we said. The picture was difficult at first, then gradually it took on meaning. I had long known they were good friends, and I automatically thought of the Banjo cabin, the place where Deke and I always went.

"Is that why daddy built the cabin?" I ques-

tioned, as my ears rung, and my head spun round like a paced up merry-go-round.

"Yes," he said. "Then one night your mother caught them."

"So — that's why mama hates the cabin, never goes there."

I rose, went to the door, stared up at the house. It had hurt her, I realized now, and for a moment I felt deeply sorry for her. I began to see too her years of bitterness, her fight against all that was lovable, emotional, why she was so utterly, profoundly cold.

"Father said Mrs. Tarver has never gotten over it, refuses to have sexual relations with your father."

I turned at the doorway and looked at him in mock belief.

"Does . . . does daddy and Barry still . . . "

"No," he interrupted, rising and coming to my side. "Not for years now, but they are still close."

"And Vilma . . . your mother?"

"She doesn't know."

"Oh God," I whispered. I could not face him now and, turning swiftly, I lay my head against the doorfacing and wept. With weariness and heartbreak assailing me, my every nerve, my every emotion, I wanted to wash it all out of my system, with a wild outpouring of tears. For the first time I saw the swift undercurrents of our life, mine and Deke's,

sensed something of the heartbreak, the despair, the shame, which had been a part of daddy's and Barry's life, and I wanted to weep for them too, to bring back, to restore something of their old life with my own flowing tears.

Deke came up behind me and embraced my shoulders, his warm face, his lips at the nape of my neck.

"Don't cry, Bebe," he murmured, the sound of his melodious voice like the roaring of the sea in my ears. "They were happy, like you and I are happy, so don't cry, baby, please don't cry. When you cry it breaks my heart, and leaving you is hard enough without that."

At his words, what they swiftly conveyed, I stopped crying and wiped my eyes on my sleeve. Turning, I leaned my back up against the door and gazed longingly into his downcast eyes.

"Maybe daddy and Barry understand about us, then," I whispered, seeing them together, yet hurtfully apart all these many years, living daily near each other, seeing but never able to touch, to speak out the secrets which they had kept buried, silenced, in their tormented hearts.

"Of course they do," he assured me, placing his hands, wide apart, on the wall, with me hemmed in between. "That is what's so beautiful about all this, Bebe. They do understand. That is why I don't feel

so bad about going away, leaving you for a little while. If they can live all these years still caring, yet never touching, then surely you and I can be separated for a month or two . . . huh . . . how about it?"

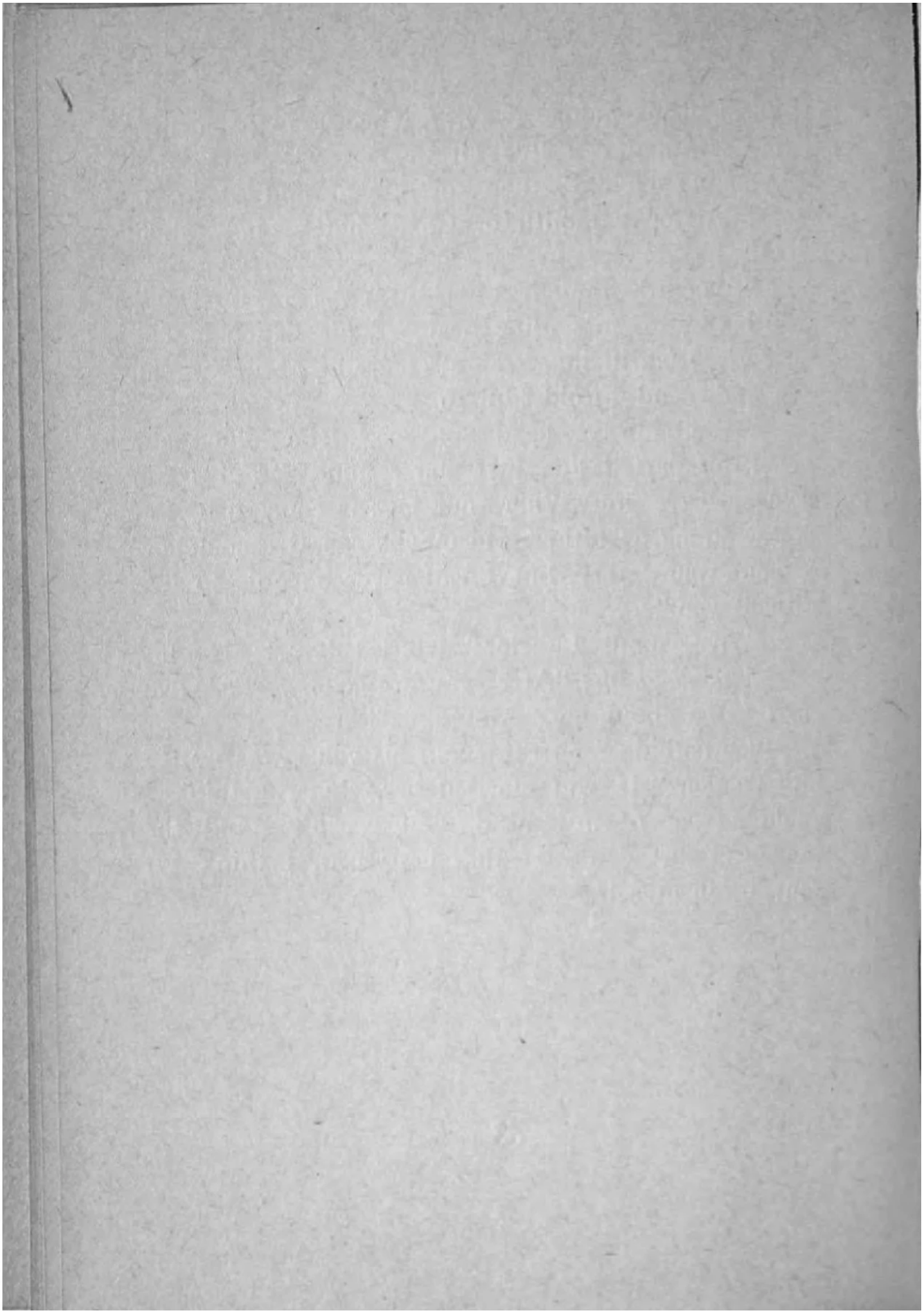
I nodded, though my heart was in my eyes, and his warm, masculine nearness, his dancing eyes, so hot, so tantilizing, was all I really needed in all the world, and I told him so.

"I will always need you too, Bebe," he whispered, his parted lips just above mine. "And I am going to have you. Where our love is concerned, I'm not as strong as father. He maybe can live somehow without your father, but I will never be able to live without you."

"What about Laurie?" I cried hopelessly, my gaze clinging to his. "After you are gone, Deke, what am I to do about her? Mama . . ."

"Do nothing," he said, and his voice was gutted with passion. "If you married her, Bebe, I think I would go out of my mind. I just can't stand the thought. I just can't. If that happened, I think I'd want to kill myself."

* * *



Chapter Five

When Deke left for his basic training in San Diego, he took everything worth living with him. He left me nothing. For the first time in my young manhood, life for me palled, a lonely threadbare existence which held little meaning and absolutely no hope.

Only his letters.

He wrote every day and told me everything. Each night, after rereading his letters again and again, I would write my answer, many times with ten and as many as twenty pages. Like mama with

her antique relics, these letters became relics to me ... holy relics, and I handled them as carefully as if they were made of ashes, one light touch and they would sift into a million fragments.

They gave me my only courage, the tonic which weathered me through the late fall days and into abrupt rains and the unbearable chills of true winter. Thanksgiving came and went as usual, with a house filled with mama's kinfolks up from Lafayette, Louisiana, with their Cajun drawls, their French hair-trigger tempers, and their damnable obvious cravings for the opposite sex, a caprice all the more dolesome on my emotions for their hearty naturalness were sharp reminders of my affection or "affliction" for Deke. Cousins made playful love to second and third and kissing cousins, and everybody talked constantly of courtships, love affairs, engagements, marriages; matings and breeding the explicit orders of their day. Passionate, a little wild, basking in youth and good health, virile, they seemed to swarm in a cesspool of breeding, and physical vigor raided mama's great rooms, invaded them with life, bursting with everything I lacked. My mind, my heart lay somewhere in California, and their Cajun frolicking, their carnal charades magnified my loneliness, my desperation to flee, to pack my things and leave, any place, any dingy room, or motel where I could be near Deke.

Even the house, with its polished rooms, its love-

ly wintry grounds, the lawn all brown with a thick carpet of pine needles, the soft shadows along the columns, the walls, became to me things jaded. It lost its glow, like everything else, where once I had loved the house, the spacious lawns, the pond, so profoundly . . . mainly because Deke loved it. He spoke of Mock Orange Hollow often in his letters, how much he missed it, and even wrote sketchy little poems to depict his love for it, the impressions it had etched on his heart, now that he could no longer be near it . . . and me.

"It is like something that has been cut out of my heart," he wrote. "And I fear it can never be put back, or replaced, as my love for you, Bebe. How could I ever replace that, if I ever lost it."

But I saw the house, with its ancient relics, as if I was looking at a ghost, and the vision of Deke the most ghostly of all. Everything I saw, everything I touched brought up sharply into my mind, my heart, tormenting thoughts of him, for he had been as much a part of these old haunted rooms as mama, as daddy. His laughter had rang in these rooms, and they rang again now, especially when I was alone in them, the echo of his laughter, which to me was worse. I could not brave entering the Banjo cabin again, to go boating on the lake, to while away the hours in the summerhouse, and I was thankful for the cold weather which lent me an excuse not to go.

Mama kept me under constant surveillance . . . or I imagined she did, through my guilt complex over Deke, and went about happily preparing for my marriage with Laurie Jordan . . . a marriage that would never come off, after what Deke had said during our last meeting.

Nothing short of heaven or hell could force me into marriage now and, even though I informed mama minutely that I had no intentions of marrying, nothing I said had any influence on her ambitious drive.

She was constantly inviting Laurie over, for afternoon teas, for poetry sessions, on shopping trips into Jackson, for entire weekends. This was a common enough practice in the south, of expecting mother-in-laws to chum with expected daughter-in-laws, but mama carried it to the extreme. No girl spent the weekend at a boy friend's house, unless engaged, and I had never mentioned one word about an engagement to Laurie, or a desire to marry her. In fact, I was stalling for time, that exact moment when I could wiggle out of it in some plausible way without putting mama on the war path.

I did see Laurie, saw her as much as mama wanted, but never with affection, never with heart. Not that I did not like Laurie. I did. She was so simple, so unbeguiling, so natural, with none of the usual charms other girls employed to make them more attractive to men, you could not help but like her.

Her, pert, heart-shaped face with its cloud of soft dark hair, her brown eyes which were never turbulent, her tiny rosebud mouth which never spoke harshly to the world, her tiny, undeveloped body, made her look like a small girl masquerading in her mother's grown up clothes. She would be undesirable, even to a boy instinctively drawn to girls, and could be described by one simple word . . . plain.

Her honesty became exasperating. She agreed so wholeheartedly with everything I said, praised me for everything I did, until in time . . . with my unbearable loss over Deke . . . she became the most boring of prudes.

I realized I was weak giving in to mama. She should have been satisfied of her guaranteed respectability by Deke consenting to go into the service, should have let well enough alone, since no one as yet had chastised the family, or the family name. But her fanatical, almost crazed, determination that I marry Laurie never slackened, not even for an occasional breather, and this pressure, this being pushed into something against my will, even against my nature, kept me in a state of confusion and doubt. What followed in this wake was my natural apprehension that my relationship with Deke was corruptively wrong. I heard of it everyday, was reminded of it constantly, either by mama bringing up the subject in order to keep it alive, cultivated, or shoving

Laurie in my face. She never missed a trick, keeping my thoughts, my naturally upset emotions harnessed to one then to the other. It became her complete occupation. She gave it her undivided attention, and she drove over my life, my thoughts, my meditations, even my privacy like a divine shepherd heading in his lost sheep.

To get away from her, I retreated to the summer-house, to the Banjo cabin, though every object brought up sharply the memory of Deke, the unbearable agony without him, and in this new, necessary bravery I began to enjoy these outings alone... just sitting on the little wharf at sunset looking out over the lake, huddled by the hearth-fire reading, listening to music, slipping into an old coat and taking long hikes in the woods behind the cabin, anything, anywhere to escape mama's scourging of words, her ridicule, her verbal prayers, her long sessions with the Bible, her riding drover over my own private life.

She robbed me of my freedom more than anything could, or anyone, and at the very crucial time when I needed freedom most, when I needed solitude, understanding, time to think.

Daddy's occupation was horses and, since I could not enroll in another college until second semester, I began to help him on our farm. Though I expected to be drafted at any moment... and sadly wished it now, with mama's miserable aggitations, walking to

the mailbox every morning to see if I had a letter from Uncle Sam, I pitched wholeheartedly into work. The stables, the paddocks, the clover fields were littered with daddy's frolicking horses roans, bays, a number from the Appaloosa strain, Tennessee Walkers, huge farm drafts, and for the first time in my life I siphoned pleasure from tending them and being with my father. The horses, and the reproachful, harassment of mama, molded us toward the sharing of daily life, a thing we had never experienced before, and I discovered a pleasure in being with him, grooming and feeding the horses, taking rides with him along the winding bridal trails, I had previously thought impossible. Like most college boys, I had to an extent, drifted away from him, finding and maintaining my own adult orbit, living day by day, month by month, taking him for granted. Now that fate brought us back together, as we had been when I was still in my early teens, we made up for time.

Perhaps, to a certain obvious degree, we became close because of my knowledge of his relation with Barry, which was so like the relation between me and Deke, I did not quite know. Perhaps, now that I had become a young grown man, we understood life from a grown up level, from a man's perspective. Whatever the magnetic link, my new joy with him dulled my thoughts of Deke, and blinded my dream-like visions of him. Working beside him, amid the

fine coated mares and sleek stallions, amid the rich animal smells, the fragrance of fodder and hay, of savory sweet feed, of ripe manure, of ferocity and tameness and sexual powers exhibited when the studs sweated in heat, when the stallions brought their mares to bay, the poignant smell of sperm, the intoxicating dazzle of strength, of instinctive ravishment, I began to feel about him a oneness which so harmoniously blended into my oneness, unlike father and son, but instead like friend to friend.

He did not know that I had learned through Deke about him and Barry, and I was loathe to tell him. It would hurt him I knew. And now, hurt myself because of Deke, my sudden mixed-up life, I had no intention of telling him.

As well as owning and breeding horseflesh for sale, he also rented out our pasture lands and barn to other horseowners who had no regular place to board them, to many of the Shriners in Jackson who frequently required horses for parades, to many people in the city who did not have stable space, to women, usually widows, who wanted to invest their money in something tangible, and to a number of racing fanatics from Lake Charles, Louisiana who desired good stable accommodations for their racers to run at Landsdown.

Along with his horse breeding and sales and rentals he sold handmade saddles and trappings, some

from Texas, and many being imported from Spain and Mexico.

Never a day passed that someone, or many, did not arrive at the stables and redwood paddocks to pet their darlings, to ride, to exercise them on lengthy bridal trails, or to test their stamina and ability on the dirt track which skirted the back of daddy's property.

And during that winter, with an occasional snow to turn Mock Orange Hollow into a beautiful Christmas card effect, things and home life ran smoothly enough. I dated no one except Laurie, both to her and mama's deep gratification, and saw no other friends, out of my genuine and profound loyalty to Deke. For he was now somewhere overseas, somewhere in the Pacific . . . but God knows where? His long letters, still longer now due to his own loneliness, were censored, and I could only guess his exact location, from the newspapers and radio.

We all gradually seeped back to normality, like the raindrops in a storm going back steadily to seek their level, merging, gathering once again into our little pleasant and instructive conversations. Since the house was frequented with guests, our doomed respectability of so short a while ago no longer appeared doomed. If people had heard about Deke and me they either shrugged their shoulders and forgot it, refused to believe the absurdity, or were decent

enough to remain quiet. Whatever their reasons, they acted as if nothing had happened to hurt our reputation, and mama continued, and dramatically, poured salve on the wound by increasing her social prominence, lengthening her status as president of practically every woman's club in Rankin county and many in Hinds. However her social obligations had taxed her endurance, she now pitted her every ounce of energy, her guile, her religious weapons . . . and there were many . . . in order to lift the family name above any smutty accusations a citizen might bring to the light of other more prominent citizen's minds. Her most important air, and to which she bent her untiring efforts, was my marriage to Laurie Jordon, for here was a name which had all but reached the top rung of the social ladder. Laurie's father was steeped in politics, and it was strongly rumored that he was the most likely candidate for the next United States Senator from the state of Mississippi. This bit of promising news was to mama like a treasure trove was to a plank walking pirate, and many winter afternoons were turned into absolutely boring affairs over coffee in the library with Mr. and Mrs. Montevideo Jordon.

Then, unexpectedly, the pot blew off the lid.

Mama and Laurie had gone to Brandon to do some last minute shopping, and had returned in fits of rage.

"I have never been so mortified in my life!" mama cried, as she sank in a flounce of skirt and brightly wrapped packages in her enormous Queen Anne chair.

"Nor I!" cried prim little Laurie, as she stood before the blazing hearthfire, removing her golden, fur-rimmed gloves. "That woman is positively indecent . . . positively!"

"Who?" daddy asked, puzzled, as he took their coats and draped them neatly over the back of a couch.

"That Bonnie Childress!" mama snapped. She patted back her snow dampened hair, then eyed me like a jailer eyeing a mistrustful prisoner. "That despicable old maid! We'll never live this down! We'll never live this down!"

Daddy looked at her dejectedly, puffing madly on an all but smoked cigarette, looked at her tiredly, as if he had long since despaired of her wrath, her uncalled-for hysteria.

He said gruffly: "Live what down?"

"This . . . this incident with Bebe and Deke," she ranted, her eyes, her lips, her cheeks hideously puffed, bloated, as if some great storm inflated her from within. "Everywhere I go . . . just everywhere I go . . . I am reminded . . . like a thorn jabbing me in the side."

"Now you know that isn't so," daddy blatted,

standing over her. "Not once has anyone even suggested such a ridiculous charge."

"It's all so absurd," Laurie whispered, half-smiling at me. "They're such darling friends. How could anyone even suggest such a thing."

Mama's eyes cut across the room to her, as if unbelieving that anyone could be so impeccable.

"My dear child," she said, ever so politely. "With your sheltered tutoring you know nothing of the gossiping tongues in this community . . . such vicious scourging of words, of accusations. No different today then when the accusers pointed damnable fingers at Christ."

"But, Mrs. Tarver . . . your not comparing?"

"Heavens no, child! I'm merely saying that we are no more civilized than they who put Jesus to death."

I looked at mama, at Laurie shivering by the fire, then at daddy, who appeared as bored, as distracted as I. The suspense, plus the worry that all this had something to do with Deke and me, dragged at my nerves.

"Mama! Please . . . what about this Childress woman? The Bible can wait."

Her eyes pinpointed me sharply, as if they were daggers impaling me to the wall.

"The Bible can wait! Bebe, no wonder you have strayed! And in the presence of your future bride.

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

More and more I believe this Mr. Bickerton, your cousin Randy . . . those others."

"Bride?" Laurie said, her voice faltering, her expression that of complete surprise.

"Why, you and my Bebe of course," mama cried, turning on her most winning smile, her eyes mellowing to something of devoted motherhood.

Laurie turned as white as a sheet. Her face suddenly melted, waned of their pert, China doll features, and she lay a nervous hand over her heart, her trim figure swaying forward, as if she was on the verge of a fainting spell. I went to her, took her hand, put my arm around her shoulders in order to steady her.

"I don't know what you're assuming, Mrs. Tarver," she uttered weakly. "But . . . until Bebe asks me to marry him, with all his love and sincerity, there will be no marriage. Let us please get this straight."

Mama's mouth flew open, and her eyes were like branding irons.

"But my dear," she cooed, leaning eagerly in her chair, some of the packages tumbling to the carpet. "It's unanimously understood between both parents that you and Bebe were matched in heaven, were meant for each other. Why . . . your father and I have discussed it frequently. I . . . we thought it was understood."

She refused to look at me, but I sensed all that

79 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

would come later, later when she had wormed her intentions firmly into Laurie's mind, had smothered over this mysterious incident with the Childress woman, which, pressed with the marriage of Laurie and me, she seemed to have forgotten.

Laurie clutched my hand, and it felt clammy, damp in the warmth of mine. Beads of perspiration formed on her brow and her lips had turned a death purple.

"Though dear Bebe is to me, Mrs. Tarver," she said, with a faint flat voice, like a timid wren before a bantering bird of paradise. "Or whatever he might mean to me, nothing is understood of our marriage as yet . . . if there is ever going to be a marriage."

Mama looked abashed. She leaned back in her chair, limp, paled.

"But I thought you loved him, Laurie dear?"

"Enough to save him from this ugly situation," she answered, braving the dictorial hautier of mama with more courage than I had ever thought she possessed. "But not enough to make a fool of him and one of me too in the bargain. At least Bebe is man enough, is gallant enough, has conviction enough . . . and perhaps cares enough . . . not to want to drag me into the demoralizing incident until it has passed, until we are both free from your bonds to speak our minds."

"Well!" mama cried, stiffening. "And after all

I've done to bring you two together, and this is all the thanks I get."

"You've meddled," daddy spoke, his voice cracking like a whip in the enormous room.

She looked up at him, a long, blank look.

"And you too, Walter! When all I've ever wanted is our happiness, yours and mine, Bebe's and Laurie's."

"You've only wanted to save Bebe's reputation, Mrs. Tarver," Laurie cried, squeezing my hand all the tighter, her expression loathing what she had to say, but say it or die of mortification. "Save it through me, through my father's reputation, his influence." Tears welled up in her eyes as she lifted her chin, gazed at me, then determinedly back to mama, who sat paralyzed in her honorary chair, her fingers like claws grasping the armrests. "Oh, Mrs. Tarver. Don't you truly know your son . . . his friend Deke? They are just good friends, the best of friends, like so many other boys at school. Do you think they are . . . like that Bonnie Childress said? Do you honestly?"

"I don't know," Mama returned flatly, smirking her lips in that frequent hint of hers that she disapproved, that the conversation was not going to her liking. "I don't ask why, or how, or is it this or that. I simply take up arms and defend . . . like a good Christian should.

"Oh, merciful God!" daddy cried.

"What did this woman say?" I asked, seemingly left out of it all, though skirted with every word, with every expression.

"It's too vile," Laurie murmured, laying her head on my shoulder. "We shouldn't even discuss so despicable a subject. For it has no place in your world, Bebe, nor in Deke's. I believe this explicitly, and I want you to know . . . now . . . that I believe none of it."

"Thanks," I said, for I needed someone's authority.

"Well, I'll tell you what she said," mama put in, rising from her chair, pulling herself up from the melee of packages and taking her place in the center of the room. "That woman . . . that brazen woman . . . walked right up to Laurie and me on the street and had the audacity to ask me if you were a morphidite!"

"Good God! Carlotta!"

"Said she knew a Negro woman once who lived in Jackson, that wore men's clothes, said she had been picked up by the police repeatedly for appearing in public in costume, but it had never stopped her. Then," mama placed her hands on her hips, eyed me steadily, "then she came out and asked if you wore womens clothes." She flung her arms down to her sides, making a loud slap as they struck her

hips. "That's what I'm exposed to when I venture out of this house, when I try to act civilized, when I try before God to be a Christian woman. The path of righteousness is hard . . . doubly hard! The cross is burdensome, so burdensome . . . "

Her voice trailed off in monotones, and Laurie searched wildly, frantically into my eyes.

"Don't listen to her, Bebe. Please . . . don't listen."

Daddy stood and looked at mama, a continuous disgusting look.

"What do you care what an old fool woman says?" he asked.

"That's right . . . why should I," she lamented, picking up the shiny packages and heading for the stairs. At the landing she paused, turned back to face us. "I am helpless in God's wrath. And he is going to bring this house down for our sins. He is going to burn us out, set us into the streets, where we will become the laughing stock of the world. And all that I have worked for, have strived for, fought for, will go up in ashes." She came back into the room, her face strangely pale, woe-be-gone in the blazing light of the sun on the snow outside. She looked sadly at Laurie, defiantly, and said almost with bitterness, a tired, defeated bitterness: "And all this could be spared, Laurie dear, could be saved . . . if only you would help us."

Laurie still clung to me, her heart pounding so loud I could detect it as her tiny breasts pressed against my chest. She was like a canary bird, terrorized out of her wits by the pursuit of an enormous cat.

"No, Mrs. Tarver, I will not marry your son, though I . . . I love him dearly," she said finally, her chin trembling, her eyes streaming with tears. "I too, like you, have my pride. I will not be used."

* * *

Chapter Six

Mama never quite forgave herself for her blunder with Laurie Jordan. She went about Mock Orange Hollow for days brooding, sulking, speechless. Had her conversation with Laurie taken place when she was alone with her, without daddy and me as a witness, I was certain she would have employed some other tactic, would have altered their meeting in some way which would place Laurie in the blame. But with daddy and I hearing every word, she had been trapped in the cruel guile of her own ambitions.

She had only one plausible ally in which to turn . . . her religion, which was not religion at all. It was, instead, a mixture of her own unhappiness, a loneliness she had willed upon herself, her life,

and tempered with a grueling determination to get what she wanted, with the Christian banner and the cross as her symbolic terror. Like the civil war Klu Klux Klan with their ghostly sheeting, their identity masked in order to terrorize, to frighten people into cowing to their benedictive examples, so did she try to bully people into her ways with vivid threats of hellfire and brimstone.

It had never worked on daddy, her banners trailing long since up that belligerent battlefield of their marriage. And, after Deke's sad departure from my life, it also failed with me.

Not that I had ever been profoundly religious. From infancy I had attended the little country church which set in a patch of green on the outskirts of Brandon. At what mama considered the proper time I had been baptized, and with as much emphasis as the other kids in Rankin county. And I had graduated from one Sunday school class to the next, all in dignified and befitting order. On weekends, when I was at home from Hinds Junior college I never failed to attend Sunday school and church with mama and daddy, and usually accompanied by Deke and his parents, but heaven or hell had never pregnated my life with that stale, jaded rhythm which seemed so prominent in so many country-bred people. The terrors of hell had never quite frightened me enough, and the utter bliss that was heaven never seemed

to me quite possible. My young adult life had always been firmly planted with facts, hard facts, like mama and daddy's strict rules.

Besides, since Deke had joined the Marines, mama and I were natural enemies, not that our love for one another had been severely damaged. Somewhere deep, very deep I still kept my old childhood love for her. And I harbored the belief that she still kept hers, but I was a young grown man now, and the tight claim she had on me when I was a child had slackened, and I drifted away from her. Perhaps, upon Deke's departure, I for the first time saw life in relation to myself, instead of life in relation to life. I saw and felt myself merging into life, a partner to the struggle, the heartbreak, the sometimes agonizing apathy of the grown-up world. Caring for him the way I did, then losing him on the threshold of humiliating shame, I hardened. And this accepted hardness, tempered with my own individual feelings, my youthful selfishness, atoned me for my deep love for Deke, and cooled my inward regard for mama, her feelings and her unhappy ambitions.

She watched daddy and me like a hawk, forever hopeful of detecting a fault in our built up reserves. She wanted somewhere to place her own blame and, during the last few shopping days before Christmas, she found her substitute.

It was on a Saturday. Snow lay over the grounds, the fields, the pasture like sprinkled sugar, possum-haw holly shone from their mounded beds, their shiny red berries like tiny bloodshot eyes, and the magnolia and petticoat palms starred all crisp and green, deeper than emerald over the long sloping hill to the main road. The clear windowpanes were lacquered with frost, the black birds and pink breasted robins hobbled in the snow over scattered bread crumbs, the pigeons danced on their little frozen porches, red toes making decorous patterns against the blinding whiteness, and the sun, like a God's shield in the white sky, caressed the hills, the icicles dripping from the eaves, the polished leaves with hints of silver.

Back in the kitchen old Matt turned out savory meats and sweets for the holidays ahead, spicy mince-meat pies, thick fruit cake with hunks of cinnamon like cut glass, Roman salads of chopped fruit, clay barrels of marinade for pickle, herbs, spices, wines, boiled hams caprisoned with pepper and sliced pineapple, hoghead cheese mounted in dried apple, plum puddings turned in an open flame, tarts dripping with icing, chicken browned in grease, biscuits, salads with rings of boiled eggs, casseroles, and candies and dips to be eaten sparingly with mixed drinks, wine, eggnog.

Daddy galvanized his depressed spirit into a

mood of holiday festivity, despite mama's doldrums, her reproachfulness, her silent activity working out another of her schemes behind her locked door, and I pitched in with him, for he, like me, was an unhappy man. It is difficult for men of the house to carry on naturally when the head of the house has always been a woman. But since mama flatly refused to cooperate with us, disregarded all the Christmas preparations, he and I dressed in our best and went into Jackson on a last minutes shopping spree.

We went early, had breakfast at the Robert E. Lee coffee shop, roamed the snow laden, crowded streets until noon, had lunched in the main dining room at the Edward's hotel, then by nightfall, with the station wagon loaded with gifts, we drove back through the purple-lined countryside, singing carols, stopping for a drink at one of the road houses, then, out of a dare, tried a reckless attempt at skating on the pond before we decided to go into the house to face mama.

I think he hated to come home as much as I did, and he laughed and made merry more that day than he had done in a long time. I think too that he enjoyed my company, actually enjoyed it without that fatherly put on which seemed to typify the fathers in so many families, especially after their children are grown and they are out on an outing; as a subconscious reprieve from earlier days.

Only once did he mention mama, and that was when we were browsing Carter's jewelers and he muttered, somewhat seriously: "I am at a loss on what to buy Carlotta."

His eyes had trailed the sparkling glass cases then, a little lost, a little robbed of their joy, and I knew with a pain in my heart that he longed desperately for things to be right at home.

But it seemed things would never be right at home, not since Deke had joined the marines and, though he and I clung to each other for support, for companionship, we pined for the heart that was mama.

* * *

Many times since, when on oftentime I looked back on those disconsolate events, and considered mama and daddy, I wondered how she could have been so religious, how she could have loved us as much as she claimed, yet never possessed the inner vision to see in turn how much daddy and I loved her.

But she never did. Not as long as I was with her.

Perhaps she loved us more. Perhaps it was through this deep, impossible love she felt for us that altered her emotions, that gave her religious doctrines this fatal, twisted turn. It is said that those who love the most hurt the most. With mama this was doubly so.

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

Chapter Seven

With the sprinkling of fresh snow on our black camel's hair coats, on our brightly wrapped packages, daddy and I slowly made our way up on the wide, ice laden gallery and into the semi-lit hall. A sudden draft of warmth flooded us, from the huge hearth fires in the living room and library and, with our drinks to fortify us, the glow seeped into us like a kind welcome, the love of home.

We found mama in the library seated before the fire. She hardly noticed us when we came in, and with nervous excitement, a muffling of voices, daddy

91 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

and I placed the gifts under the pink frothed tree, a long leaf pine, and not the traditional cedar, for the pine had remained a symbolic ritual of the Delany family for as long as I could remember. It was because the blossom of the long leaf pine was shaped like a cross, which had instilled in my grandfather the essential essence of Christmas, the birth and death of Christ.

"I wish Deke could be here for the holidays so he could get my gift for him," I said casually to daddy, though my heart ached anew for his amorous presence. "Instead of overseas . . . fighting."

"He may come yet," daddy consoled me or, rather tried to console me. Nothing could console me honestly except Deke in person. "The Germans are on their knees, and it is only a matter of time before the Japs will be snuffed out of every cave on every island in the Pacific, then your Deke will be coming home wearing the Croix de Guerre."

"That would make your Christmas perfect," spoke up mama, very pert and very saucy, as she leaned in her chair and peered victoriously at us.

Daddy raised up from the tree and stared absently at her.

"Why shouldn't it make his holiday complete?" he asked directly.

"His paramour," she sighed, rolling her enormous eyes. "All kisses and sugar and spice!"

With somewhat reluctance, daddy and I left the tree and went to the hearth and stood before the fire, looking with quiet surprise down at her, at her yes-I-told-you-so-expression, her pursed up lips, her triumphant hauteur.

"Is this something else you've dreamed up, Carlotta?" his good looking face flushed from the drinks we'd had on the road.

"It's all here in these scented letters," she said, waving an envelope in his face. "The scent of lilac and rose . . . the symbolic fragrance of lovers."

I looked at the envelope, then at the stack of letters in her lap, the loosened velvet ribbon . . . Deke's letters to me . . . I recognized instantly, and something of terror, mingled with apprehension enraged me.

A headstrong child . . . who had discovered her evil toys!

She turned accusing eyes to me, and there was something of loathing in them, something of thwarted trust, and a little of heartbreak.

"So . . . you are a . . . a . . . fairy!" she gasped, as if, through her curiosity she had found what she had longed to find, but in finding it also the death-knell of her own despair.

"Oh, merciful God!" daddy shouted, jerking the letter from her. "What's all this, Carlotta? Whose letters are these?"

She laughed a throaty, evil laugh.

"They're Bebe's letters . . . from Deke!"

"And you read them?"

She nodded her head triumphantly.

"Yes, Walter, I read them, line for line, word for gaudy, slimy word."

His face suddenly went white. There were blue shadows under his eyes, and his mouth opened and closed, as if speaking, but no audible words came out.

"Why, you miserable, cheating, eavesdropping . . . my God! Carlotta! Bebe is grown. He's a right to his own privacy. Woman! What possessed you to get his mail and read it? What did you hope to gain?"

She flinched, as if he had struck her, then recoiled. In an instant her expression changed from shock to wrath, then into rage.

"It all comes back, doesn't it, Walter!" she cried, standing and shaking the handful of letters in his face. "Like you and Barry, you couldn't stand being caught . . . found out . . . him and Deke!"

"If you had an ounce of propriety left, Carlotta, don't uproot this, don't reopen wounds that have long since tried to heal, don't say something in the presence of Bebe you will later regret, and will keep on regretting for the rest of your life . . . don't, for God's sake, don't!"

I stood rooted to the hearth, caught up into the

wild storm of their words, hinged on some awesome incident out of their past, becoming a part of some dreadful long kept secret . . . a secret I already knew, and with uncontrolled rage . . . rage at her for taking my letters, the secret love words of Deke, for her gouging out daddy's heart again and again, never allowing his wounds, his affection for Barry to heal, I shout:

"Mama! I already know about daddy and . . . and Barry, and it don't make any difference. I still love him, and I will always love him. That was their life . . . the same as this is mine and Deke's, what we do, what we say, what we write to each other, and you have no right to pry into our life, just as you had no right to pry into daddy's and Barry's. It has only caused you a lot of years of unhappiness, just as this is going to cause you more unhappiness."

She surprisingly remained silent, the letters folded near her heart. And daddy straightened to his full dignity, rejuvenated, as though some strength he had lost was once again flowing back into his body. Then he spoke softly, all rage gone.

"Carlotta . . . Bebe is right. Can't you see that. Can't you forget . . . that about me and Barry . . . about Bebe and Deke. All your storms and threats and damnations can't ever change one bit of it, not one word, not one feeling, not one ounce of emotion. It is dead and over, and whatever Bebe felt for Deke

may be dead and over, for Deke may never come back, he may die overseas."

"How can I forget," she murmured, on a verge of wild tears, her lower lip trembling. "Walter... how can I forget. How do you think it feels, being a woman, loving like a woman?" She stood erect, spreading her hands far out, one hand with my beloved letters, the other with the limp velvet ribbon. "Look at me. Walter look at me. I am a woman... a good looking woman. And there is love in me, warmth, compassion. When I married you, many men, fine looking men desired me, would have been proud to marry me. How do you think I feel? How do you think I have felt all these years, living in humiliation, knowing you preferred Barry . . . a man . . . to me! How can a woman accept such a fact?"

"But it wasn't the way you thought it was at all," Daddy said, facing her defiantly. "If you had left well enough alone then you would have avoided these years of unhappiness. But you wouldn't let it die. You wouldn't let us forget. Just the way you are doing now with Bebe. You are going to keep on, prying, meddling, suspicioning, until you will ruin his life... like you have tried to ruin mine."

"I am doing this to save his life," she shouted, ignoring Matt back in the kitchen, the sound of her voice shrill, edged with malicious austerity. "I don't want Bebe to end up living with men, loving them.

I want him to have a normal life, to marry, father children, become a man you and I can be proud of, something good to come out of our own wrecked and tormented life. What we have spoiled for ourselves we have spoiled, but Bebe is yet young, his life ahead of him, and I want him to nip such ideas out of his head now, while there is yet time to save him. I am his mother, and I have more right than anyone else in the world to want him to be normal. I want to be able someday to point him out on the street and say: that is Walter Benjamin Tarver. He is my son, and I am so proud of him."

"Then, if you want that so much," daddy advised delicately, "why don't you forget this ridiculous thing about him and Deke, quit prying, quit building something rotten out of something noble and clean. You know, Carlotta, you made the same mistake with me once, remember? Why make that same mistake again with Bebe?"

"Because," she said, flinging out her words as if they were venom on her lashing tongue. "I want to kill it where it is. I want to destroy it before it takes such roots it can never be destroyed. And I want Vilma and Barry to read these letters, to learn what the real truth is . . . so they can do likewise with Deke, to try and save him before it is too late."

"Over my dead body!" daddy half-screamed. All hell broke loose, as he went into a rage. Snatching

the letters from mama's hands, he tossed them quickly into the flames. "It is going to end here, and never again are we going to bring up the subject of me and Barry, and Bebe and Deke. The only way to kill it is to forget it."

"But I'm going to tell Vilma," she cried in penetrative retaliation. "Just watch me and see!"

Daddy gave her a piercing look, his jaw set, his eyes like the eyes of a lion in a cage.

"You do, Carlotta, and I'll divorce you, so help me God! I've had enough, and Bebe's had enough, and you're not going to cause further unhappiness by telling Vilma and Barry, or to put added worries into the mind of a boy who is somewhere overseas fighting for his country, fighting to do and live as he pleases."

That froze her tongue, momentarily at least, and she slumped down into her great Queen Anne chair, a wretched, disheveled woman.

I looked at her for a brief instant, as my brain registered the expression on her face, a face from which all compassion had fled, and an iron face, a face hewn from marble took its place. Then I gazed into the flames sadly, watched as the fire curled about Deke's precious letters, their ends folding inward in black, charred remains.

"I'm sorry, Bebe," daddy whispered, patting me on the shoulder. "Please forgive me."

Chapter Eight

On Christmas eve morning I received a thick letter from Deke an unexpected surprise. I bubbled over with happiness. It had been weeks since I had last heard, I had been in agony, concluding that he was somewhere in actual combat, taking one of those Jap held islands, and everyday that I did not hear magnified my desperation, my constant fears that he might be wounded or killed, his fine, bronze body lying in some desolate trench, in some water filled foxhole or blockhouse.

There were so many callers that day I dared not take the time to read it, but tucked it safely away in my room until the glad, dazzling hour when I could be alone, to fill my being with his every word.

The Jordon family came by to pay their respects, bringing everyone elaborate gifts, remained for servings of eggnog and fruit cake presided over by old Matt turned out in a white apron with cardboard stiff ruffles, a white bandana, and a Christmas red silk dress which swept the carpets. Some of our kin, riding in a sleigh with silver bells jingling, cousins and aunts and uncles out on a holiday lark, halted briefly for an exchange of greetings and refreshments, then were off again in a whirl to greet other friends, other waiting kin. Neighbors, as they had done year in and year out, paused to wish us a Merry Christmas. And that night, as it had been as long as I could remember, almost a planned ritual, the Baxton's came to eat Christmas eve supper with us, and to share in the opening of gifts. This year with a touch of disconsolation, for Deke was not present to join in the festivities.

"If only he were here to receive your gift personally," Vilma said thoughfully, as I handed out the presents. A tear caught in her eyes, and she squeezed my hand lovingly when she took the gift I had for Deke.

"You should be proud he is not here . . . to be

exposed to all this shame," mama spoke up. "He's free of all that now, spared."

Vilma and Barry eyed one another, and daddy gave me a sick look. We both sensed what was coming, and at that moment, in this holiday lit room, with the warm colored lights on the tree glowing dimly, reflecting on our silent, perplexed faces, I imagined I noticed the lines below his eyes wane to a nauseous green.

"I could never be proud our boy is where he is," Vilma said, and her voice was dry, brittle. "Maybe, proud, that he is fighting for his country, but other than that . . . no, never. He is the only son we have, and we want to keep our son, safe and alive . . . if we can."

Mama was not one ever to be defied.

"But, Vilma, while he is there, fighting bravely, he is doing the works of God. But here, sinking into this pit of iniquity . . . what could save him?"

Daddy looked with hard distrustful eyes.

"Carlotta . . . please . . . don't spoil their holiday."

In truth he was saying: don't spoil ours as well.

"Do you mean, what you told me back in the kitchen just before supper?" Vilma asked, lifting her eyebrows sarcastically.

"Yes," mama answered, firmly.

My every nerve suddenly went taut. So, she had told her, despite daddy's warning that he would divorce her if she did. My heart tore at my chest. I dragged my gaze round to daddy. He was looking at me, a sidelong glance, and in his remorseful face I detected his confusion, his belated wrath.

Mama went on, as though we were playing some kind of hideous game.

"Bebe should be there too, in the service, fighting, doing a man's work, instead of here, causing all the neighbors to talk, embarrassing us all."

"You don't mean that?" Barry questioned, shaking his head back and forth very slowly, as though he could not take in completely what she had said. "You don't mean, Carlotta, that you wish Bebe was overseas, risking his life, like our Deke, just on account of what the neighbors are saying?"

Mama nodded, as though in that nod she was finally vanquishing all the horrors of the world and bringing in new, celestial promises of paradise.

"It would be a deed to end this foul imposition upon our families," she remarked, eyeing us each in turn. She swallowed the last of the coffee in her cup and placed it neatly on the cocktail table. "Once Bebe was gone, they would automatically forget. Then, when he came back after the war, a man, maybe married, they would think they had been wrong about him . . . even though they are right, as you know they

are right. Bebe and Deke are like that! They are! They are!"

I wanted to shout at her, scream, humiliate her in the presence of Vilma and Barry, as I sat staring at their hurt, bewildered faces, sensing, through my own thwarted reactions, their misguided hearts. But I realized regretfully that nothing could persuade mama's mind, that no words of mine, even perhaps daddy's could break her hard, stubborn reserve, a reserve dominated by religion, backed up profoundly by her invisible God.

She would go to her grave with the firmly established belief that she had done right by me and Deke, and not even God himself could alter her conviction.

"Carlotta," daddy said hurtfully, imploringly apologetic, not to her, but to Vilma and Barry who sat close, frozen-eyed, numbed by the deplorable theme of the conversation which always seemed to spring up of late. "Don't bore them with such talk. It solves nothing, and gets us nowhere but in a state of confusion and rebellion. Let's talk about something else . . . something enlightening, something with the Christmas spirit in it. We are all saddened enough that Deke is not with us tonight. Why rub acid in our wounds?"

Mama lifted her chin, squared her shoulders, she was deep in her crusade now; and nothing could

spoil this for her, the crusade that she wanted to take into the golden kingdom as many shipwrecked souls as she could. And to her estimation, we were all storm tossed sinners, drowning on the high seas.

"I just want Vilma and Barry to know that Deke, too is . . ."

"I don't give a damn what he is," Vilma interrupted her, her voice unusually loud, which turned all our gaze. She rose from her chair and, going to the hearth, turned to face us. "I just don't give a damn, Carlotta. You keep harping on what Deke is, and what Bebe is, and if you insist on spoiling our Christmas then I am going to help you out a little. I like you, Carlotta, always have, and you know that, and Walter knows it, and I suppose I always will. But this religious kick you're on is too much for me to stomach, tonight anyway. The way I feel, I don't care if Deke wanted to wear dresses and high heels. I want him back with us. He is all Barry and I have got, and we love him no matter what he is, who he likes, what he becomes . . . just so he lives and comes back to us, safe, sound, whole." She drew in a deep, excited breath and went on, her emotions beginning to tear their way through the thin veneer of her reserve. "You should be glad, Carlotta, that Bebe is here with you, safe, alive, and shouldn't give a rap what our giddy neighbors think or say. And if you loved Bebe, truly loved him . . . like Barry and I love Deke, then you'd

be gathering him up in your arms right this minute wishing him a Merry Christmas, instead of worrying about your spotless reputation. I'm sick to death of your reputation. Frankly, you wouldn't have a reputation, if you don't apple polish the deacon, the mayor, the representatives, if you didn't worm your way into every club in Rankin county, and try to become president of every worthwhile organization. You won't get to your heaven that way, Carlotta, nor by tormenting Bebe either!"

"Haven't you about said enough?" Barry said, rising and going to her side. "You're getting yourself worked up, saying things you'll regret later."

He caught her by the arm and she flung his hand away.

"I'm going to have my say," she cried hysterically. "I've lived day by day, night after night worrying whether Deke is alive or not, if he is dead, if he will ever come back to us, if I will ever see him again. Frankly, it's been hell. But I've tried to bear up, even though Deke didn't get his commission, even though he was sent over seas. I still tried to swallow my hurt and pray for the best. But he is in the Marines, Carlotta, on account of the mess you went and stirred up at Hinds junior college, asking everybody questions, as if you didn't trust your own boy, nor mine, putting your own faith down with your family. Barry and I tried to do our best by it, since we think so much

of you and Walter, and naturally Bebe. Like fools, we persuaded Deke to join, when he didn't want to join. Now look at where he is. And he may never come back, just on account of a little incident at college, and that old maid Mr. Bickerton. Oh, God! how I wish Deke were here tonight, like Bebe, so I could hold him in my arms . . . once more . . . please! God!"

"Now, now, sweetheart," Barry whispered, consoling her. "Deke's coming back . . . he's coming back."

Tears rolled down my face, unchecked, and daddy looked physically sick, his dark head bowed, one hand gripping the other, helplessly. Only mama remained intact, loyal to her faculties. She was the gallant savior, and saviors must remain courageous. One's Gods must at all hazards go clear of blame.

"It's a terrible thing, this was mess," daddy tried to apologize, to make amends. "Let's have a drink, an eggnog to celebrate Deke's coming home. I'll fetch Matt from the kitchen."

Barry halted him with an upraised hand.

"Don't bother, Walter, we'd better be going. It's getting late anyway, and we have a million things to do."

Daddy's pale, sickish face, his hurt eyes, stood out harshly in the semi-lit room.

"You're not going on the account of . . ." he struggled with words, faltering to stillness.

"No, it's not that. We've just got to be going."

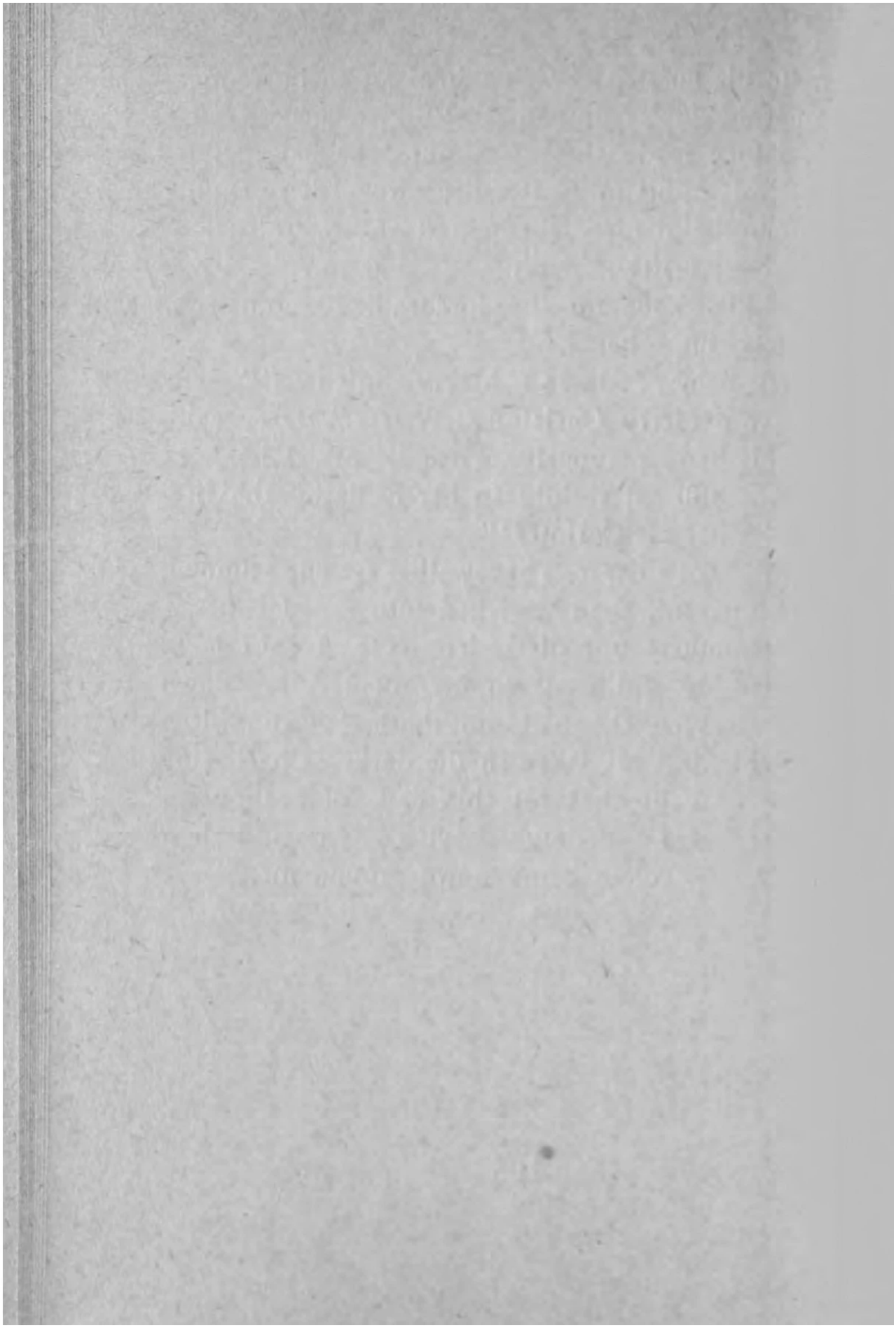
Under daddy's stunned gaze and mama's set expression, they made their way into the hall, Vilma clinging to him, his arms steadily around her. Daddy and I followed in after them, and at the front door Vilma turned swiftly, imminently, and embraced me. She then kissed me on the forehead, and muttered through choking sobs:

"Bebe baby . . . have a Merry Christmas!"

"Have a Merry Christmas, Walter," Barry said, shaking his hand nervously. Then he called back to mama, who still sat rigidly in her chair by the fire. "Merry Christmas, Carlotta!"

She did not answer. They waited for one stunned, awkward moment, then vanished into the darkness.

My emotions uprooted, irresolute, I said good night to daddy and went to my room. I sat down for a moment on the bed, not bothering to switch on the lights, just sat there in the darkness harboring my sense of guilt that all this had come about. I could hear mama and daddy having words, and their loud, shrieking voices came down around me.



Chapter Nine

I took my letter from Deke from its hiding place and opened it carefully. His fine handwriting jumped at me and, leaning closer under the beam of golden light I began to read, my heart lumped up at my throat, my eyes, my brain drinking to the full meaning of his every word:

Dear Bebe:

I hope you get this letter by the Xmas holidays, but I don't know. Mail is so slow here, and there is such a delay in censoring. I cannot say where I am except that I am in the Pacific theater, which, if you have kept up with the Marines in the paper, you can spasmodically guess. I can tell you this. It is not paradise.

I do not wish to worry you, or burden you with my emotional problems, but I am so blue and homesick tonight as I sit and write this by candlelight, thinking of you, our life together, the long months without you, that I can keep nothing from you. So I must write what I feel, for you know me too well, and will read between the lines anyway.

Do not be alarmed. I am not wounded. I am not sick, and I have enough to eat, such as it is. I am dry most of the time, and a foxhole is not the worst place in the world to sleep, even without a pillow and blankets and you beside me. But tonight, my heart is heavy and troubled, and I long to pour out my thoughts to you, and only to you, for you are the only person in the world who understands me. Thank God for that!

As I lie in my foxhole at night, long after the other Marines are asleep, and gaze up at the stars ... and nowhere in all the world are the stars as beautiful as here ... I ask myself how all this came about. Surely not because I am a soldier at heart. I hate the very idea of the service, the war, the dirt, the killing, and I do not relish the idea of killing ... anyone ... even the Japs. I was never meant to be a killer, bloodthirsty, like they have taught us in the Marines. I was meant to live quietly at home, with you, doing what we do together, the dreams we had,

the dreams we fulfilled. So . . . when I lie in my fox-hole, with the mortar shells whizzing overhead, I ask myself . . . why are you here Deke Baxton, and out of all, what am I really fighting for, and my answer is this.

You, Bebe. I am fighting for you . . . and me together after this terrible war. I am fighting for our right to be together, to live together, as we please, as our hearts will it. And I think of us together, at the Banjo cabin, lying out on the wharf at night, with the moonlight mellow along the trunks of the trees, the gentle sound of the water slapping the pilings, the sound of a train far off in the night, the way the breeze comes in over the lake, and into the moss laden trees, and the soft glow on your body, and the little glowing lamp through the cabin windows. I lie and think of all these things, and as I think them I see them again, and it is like living them all over again . . . like when you and I are sitting out on the front gallery of Mock Orange Hollow, with the moonlight slanting across the tall white columns, and the eerie way the roses look impaled on the luminous light, and our horseback rides along that old Indian trail we love so much, and our swimming, and lying together beneath the heavy shadows of the live oaks, hidden from the world, and everything all the more exciting because of our hiding, and in the winter, us curled up before the fire in the cabin

glorying in just being together, back during those wondrous times before the trouble started and we were free to do as we pleased.

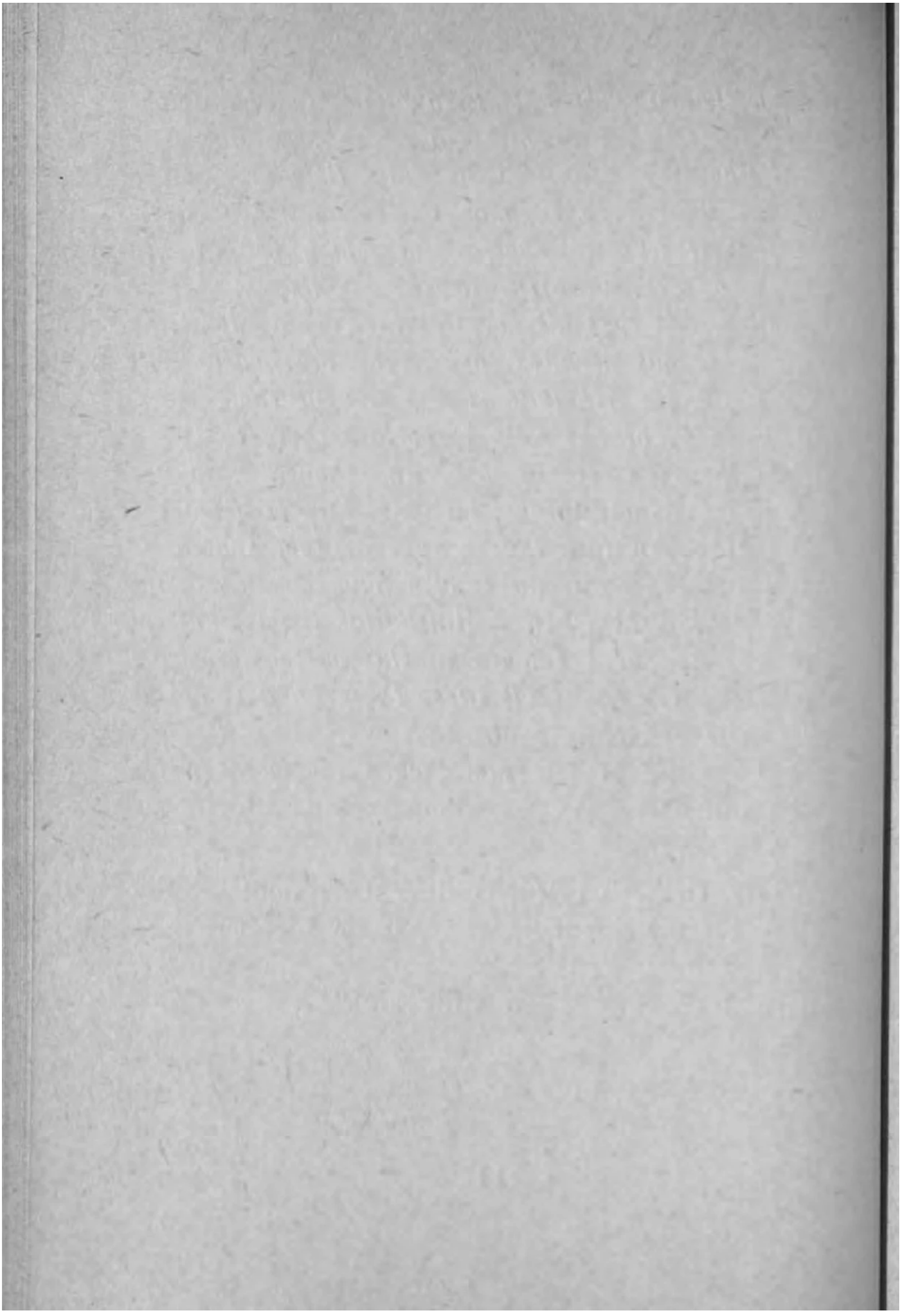
And that is why I am here, Bebe, here overseas fighting this war, because of all these things, and my deep love for these things. Maybe this is what they mean when they say patriotism, the love of home, my deep desires to live the way you and I lived ... for too brief a while. Maybe that is why I am willing to go on fighting, maybe dying ...so that I can keep these things safe for us when the fighting is over.

But, when I think of these things I become frightened and I break out in cold drops of sweat, and I say to myself that maybe, after the war, we can never go back to those old times. And I want so much to go back to them. I belong in those times with you, and I fear they will be gone when I return. I fear that our parents, the new way of life, the things they feel about us, will force us never to be together again like we use to, and that war and time itself will change all that ... maybe even change us, and I cannot bear to think about it. I cannot bear to think that maybe you will no longer care about me, that while I am over here fighting, having been tossed into this war through father's and mother's insistence, you will forget me, and will go on to newer, more pleasing joys.

So, that is why I feel so alone, so abandoned tonight . . . feel that no one really cares what happens to me, that reputation means more than love, more than the fighting, dying for one's country. I know now that it was not patriotism which caused my parents to cart me off into the service, but their reputation, and that all my fighting, my doing without, my wounds perhaps, or maybe my death, will prove nothing worthwhile. I am out of their lives, and that may be the only important thing to them, so that they can remain safe. And though I do not want to think these things, I cannot help but imagine that maybe you feel that way now too, that now that I am gone you no longer have any need for caring, so tonight when I finish this letter, and all nights as long as I remain in this wretched war, I will lie and cry about all these things, and tomorow try to rise and hope again that you will still care, that things will be the same when the war is over and I will be on my way home again . . . then . . . I still wonder . . .

"Oh, Deke," I cried, holding the crumbled letter to my heart and flinging myself on the bed in a flurry of frantic tears. "You are wrong! You are wrong! I do care! I do still care!"

* * *



Chapter Ten

I tucked the letter away in my secret hiding place where mama couldn't find it, and each night before going to bed I took it out carefully and re-read it, always in a welter of hot tears. I still have the letter to this day, framed, behind gold veined glass above my desk. It has become my most precious possession. Though I had a number of gifts Deke had given me from time to time, this was and has been more precious to me because it was his last gift . . . his eternal gift, though I did not sense it at the time.

But I should have sensed it. I should have cared for him enough to read between the lines, to understand the full meaning to his emotions which he had lain so bare. Later I knew, understood, later when I had lost him and had returned again and again to his last letter for a remnant of consolation.

In time the letter became a holy relic, his heart, my own heart, in paper and ink. I guarded it jealously, nursed it religiously, paid homage to it as if it were a medal, the parchment of our love.

It was all I had, or would ever have now of Deke.

* * *

January moved into Mock Orange Hollow with a roar. Rain lashed on the windows, bent the long slender limbs of the live oaks until they scraped the surface of the pond mournfully, and the cold, harsh winds drove on the house until the doors squeaked, until the panes rattled, until the hundred year old beams groaned painfully. All this only added to my burden of the heart, and magnified my present misery. In my loneliness I missed the ordered, scheduled life at Hinds Junior College, the boys and girls I knew, the open fields of hay where the students labored, the barns and silos, the dairy cows, the college's prize bull, the gardens and the

glassed in laboratories where we experimented with plants and insects, and where we raised various crops for the college's supply of food.

Hinds was the only college in the south which accepted canned goods, homemade clothes, eggs, chickens, and seasoned hog meat from female students as tuition fees. And from the male students, cows, horses, loads of hay, dried potatoes, yams, sacks of apples and home grown peaches and home cured hams as fees rather than cash or checks.

It was a self-sustaining college, feeding its students and faculty from the intake of homegrown supplies, and from food raised and produced directly on the farm campus.

Yes, I missed it, as I missed Deke, and the memory of it tore through my heart like the cold wintery winds tore through the gnarled countryside. I missed the little town of Raymond too, with its silver water tower, its one movie house where Deke and I always went each Friday night, the courthouse square . . . like the traditional Greek temple . . . and the squares of prim little houses painted in pastel shades, dense beneath shady oaks, its slate gray streets as clean as if they had been scrubbed daily with soap and water.

More than all I missed Deke and me there together, small town students in a small town college, typical all over the South, yet how grand, how im-

portant we had seemed there together, dazzled by our freedom, that scoured country playground, that rural paradise.

I missed everything we did together, and my mind became a projector which flashed one after the other into the darkness of my loneliness, images of memory, on which I dwelled forlornly. I almost cried each time I saw visions of him practicing the Rapper Sword Dance with five other students out under the shade trees on the new mint green of the campus lawn, how dashing he had looked in his white uniform as he danced the Prince of Wales figure, then with the other boys, each holding a hoop, whirled into the Rose figure, then into the Cumberland Square Eight. I almost went mad at the memory of him under the showers after track and tennis, and how he stood out in a crowd of other students going in hordes from class to class, from building to building, darting in and out among the trees, laughing and talking, and how my hungry eyes would trace his steps, awed by his magnificence.

But those glorious days were gone from me now, vanished into yesterday, and the only way I could call them back was through my remembrance.

It has been said that lovers can see forward as well as backward, can see into the past and into the future, wherever their lover is concerned. I do not altogether believe this. Sometimes I believe that

lovers are the blindest of all. It was so with me, even though Deke seemed to possess it in his last letter. From the papers and radio I should have guessed how the tide was turning in the war, that though the marines were winning a hard battle in the Pacific, their spoils asked a great price, and that the beginning of the end was steadily rising to a flaming pitch, gathering to a dramatic climax.

All I knew for certain was that somewhere in that awesome carnage Deke was fighting for his life ... for him and me ... our life together, and this alone was my only salvation ... the only worthwhile meaning in my life. Let the war rage! Let it level to ashes in a holocaust of fire every island in the Pacific, I did not care, as long as it spared Deke, as long as he returned safely to Mock Orange Hollow and to me.

The days and nights became brief intervals of hell for me, and every time I heard a newscast, or read a newspaper, scanning the lists of the dead killed in combat, tracing out the progress of the Marines from island to island, from beachhead to beachhead, I lived in a maw of sleepless nightmares. The war seemed to go on and on, endlessly, dragging death over the world, and during that Feburary of 1945 when I listened terrified at the news about the marines invasion of Iwo Jima, I steeped my being in total grief. I knew Deke was on that island, that

he was dead, that no one, not even him with all his masculine magnificence, could survive that terrible onslaught.

I prayed with a deeper earnestness than I had ever before prayed in my life, pleading that God spare him, bring him back safely to me, and I clung to the old memories of him, the gifts he had given me, his letter, watched the mail for more letters from him . . . which never came . . . and paid homage to the memory of his love, the love I had lost, with a devotion equal to that of the saints and their God. In fact, more so. Deke, my God, was flesh and blood, was warm, was alive, and his spirit, the grave beauty of him, followed on my every breath, walked with me by day, and slept with me by night. His spirit was so strongly imposed on me that I sought aloneness, so no other human beings could break the spell by their obnoxious presence. And I found momentary solace in the summerhouse, despite the cold drafts which fanned the tiny hearth fire into embers, and the monotony of the wind driven shutters which constantly banged against the walls like demons trying to break in. There, amidst my lovely things, and many that were his, I prostrated my ultimate being, bowing to the inevitable. The shadow of his love, his grave spirit, bending over me in the chilly room, in the howling darkness, made of me a desperate prisoner, but a willing prisoner, a volunteer to the

madness of his vacancy. With my heart dragging like a millstone, I became the soulless sacrifice upon the shadowy altar of his being, his lost love, a love which reached out from across the Pacific waters and laid its melancholy on my agony.

The summerhouse, during those dark lonesome days, those mad days and nights of slumbering grief, became both my tomb and my temple. I vowed that if he was killed, that if he never came back to me, I would take my own life, and conceal my corpse among these precious, memorial objects.

But that, also, was denied me. It is said that wretchedness forever knows a greater wretchedness than its own, that wickedness is forever befriended by wickedness, that the cursed are forever cursed. Be it so. My strange love was to become also my doom.

The summerhouse, with its many walls . . . octagon . . . faced the north sullenly. It was a place of which the influence and magic of the modern day were not good. Even in February, when the first shoots of purple violets break the snow, when the bewhiskered moss is stiff and glassy with icicles, when the cold air is heavy with fragrance and old winter scents, when black birds sang . . . still, something I believe that haunted the place, like Deke's love haunted me, set my heart fluttering. No place is its own, really, and that which is most stained with old

tumults and agonies has the strongest fascination. And so it was with the summerhouse, the temple of Deke's and my love, that we had made love there, the strangeness of it, seemed to haunt it, to vex it in some weird, melancholy way. Whatever had happened there I believed happened there still. Someone who had been there before . . . like Deke . . . was there still. The rafters under the roof was mournful with old pain, the floors affronting the friendly hearth grieved from lost lovers, or from vanished joys more pathetic than pain and grief in the firelights fleeting mimicry of immortality.

Here, this winter, blinded by melancholy and grief, the scent of dead blossoms, of decaying fruit, of sickly, half-sweet mud, of brooding cedars, the moods, mingled with my own, became narcotic, almost aphrodisiac. The magnolias and ferns were like waving funeral plumes, the huge cracks in the mortar were like beings drunk on passion and cruelty, and within, I seemed already in my grave, heavily covered with the prison of frost and snow, or shouted into silence by the wind, or scourged by the blind rebellion of despair and grief.

Deke was already dead, though I did not know it then, even though he had died a million times over in my heart. He was dead. My floundering body knew he was dead. My soul knew he was dead. But my heart refused to believe. I refused to be con-

quered. I would not be driven out of my refuge, my temple, my treasure trove of memories.

Yet, fate in the form of mama drove me out and destroyed my symbol of remembrance.

One day when daddy was away at Meridian to help a friend bring in a delayed colt, mama set fire to the summerhouse . . . in order to burn away the old world and make way for the new, and later sowed the ground in salt, her way of destroying Sodom.

The flames shot up into the moss laden trees, melting the ice, and she stood before it like a martyred saint, the pigeons in the dovecote making fleeting patterns with their shadows, whirling round and round the roaring summerhouse in frantic circles. Their fierce shadows multiplied their number, and the side lawn was filled with terror.

I rushed out.

One thought hammered its image on my brain. Deke's precious things were in that small secluded house, his statues which he had collected since grammar school days, his portable record player, his Spanish guitar, his saddle, his most cherished books, all the worldly things which had linked him with me, our love, and he had kept them there for that reason.

I rushed past mama who stood on the watershed of the hill, gripping a flaring pine torch, which crystalized her eyes, her face in a kind of dumb terror.

I looked at her and she looked at me, and there between us lay a registered hatred.

"You can't go in there," she half-screamed, when she saw my intentions. "You'll burn alive, like in the days of Lot!"

Still running, I paused once and glared back at her.

"Wouldn't that please you, mama," I cried, feeling her wrath and at the same time realizing my loss if the summerhouse were not saved. But I could not save it. As I reached the entrance the roof caved in, and flame and debris crashed down around me. It was gone! And with it were gone Deke's precious things, and the secluded alcove where he and I had played out our strange romance.

Retreating in panic, my face streaming with sweat from the licking flames, flames which now mushroomed up through the limbs of the live oaks, turning them to the blackness of soot, I ran back up the hill to mama.

She stood above me, silhouetted between me and the late afternoon sun, her taffeta dress rattling like dry leaves, the pine torch laying its bare light over her face, her arm, and her eyes on mine were the most ensnaring I had ever seen, the inhuman eyes of a witch who, by her magic, had conjured up hell, but had no toxin with which to put it out.

"I hate you woman!" I shouted at her, loathing

every fiber of her, despising her unjust retaliation, and hating still more her false invisible God.

"It should be destroyed, for your sake," she cried, her voice filled to the brim with her righteous venom. "It is a house of ill repute, a place which has sickened you, like a disease, and I must pluck it out. I must! I must, Bebe, so you can get well. As long as it stands you will keep on being sick, and will get still sicker, sicker . . . sicker."

She drew out these last words deplorably, as if she despised what they stood for, and more so because they were linked with me.

I glared at her with all the stored love I had for Deke, my loss lighting my gaze with the awesome dudgeon I felt for her now.

"Do what you will with me, mama, for I love Deke, understand! And nothing you can ever do will change that, or destroy what I feel for him!"

Her face, fleeting under the pine torch, went waxy white.

"So! You confess!"

"Yes!" I screamed, hoping that even God would hear me. "I confess. I love him! I love him! I love him! And . . . I hope it breaks your heart!"

Rage, thwarted outrage smothered her, like the flickering light of the flames, and her eyes popped outrageously.

"Then . . . I'm glad I burned it now," she said,

without screams, without an obvious outcry, but ply, coldly, final. "Yes . . . Bebe! I'm glad I bur it. I have been right all along. God told me I right, and he said, burn away the old world make way for the new."

We stood there framed against the towering low flames, shouting at each other.

"Did he tell you what the new world was to mama?"

She considered for a moment, her face a w torment of flesh and wrinkle.

"A world without Deke!"

She glared triumphantly.

My soul cringed at her words, her cracki voice.

"How could you, mama?" I cried, rather whi pered, abashed by the cruelty of the female mi "Hurt me if you will, if that will give you any sat faction, and keep on hurting daddy, but not Dek Please not Deke! Not while he is overseas, fightin not while he is sacrificing everything for us. Lo what you've done." I pointed toward the summe house, which now lay crushed to its concrete fou dations, the shrubs and evergreens which embrac it burned a deep brown. "All his things. Did you ha to destroy them too?

She drug her gaze from me and, for a quiet m

ment, looked down the hill to where the summerhouse had stood so nobly for over a hundred years, looked sadly, with one hand over her heart, and for an instant her face altered to something of kindness, motherhood, as if she had spanked a naughty child and later regretted her discipline.

"Well . . . it is done now," she answered finally. She snuffed out the torch in the soft muck, then went up the hill to the house.

I remained until the last tongue of flame licked its way into the glowing embers, then I climbed up to the solitude of my room. I took out his letter and reread it slowly, painfully. It was all I had of him now, and as my tear rimmed eyes traced out the words, hearing, as I read, his soft murmuring voice, I began to realize the full meaning of his words, the things he had put on paper. I trembled from the fear of it, as he had trembled when he wrote it. And I saw for the first time how difficult it was going to be for him and me in the future. Like he had written, things would never be the same, and I saw this with a startling new clarity. Mama, and those like her would intervene, try and stop us, and would stop us in time.

"Oh, Deke," I cried, folding the letter neatly and returning it to its hiding place. "Come back! Please come back! I need you . . . I must . . . must see you once more. I can't live without you."

But that night, no sooner than daddy had returned home from Meridian, we received word from Walter that Deke was dead . . . killed while on the Island of Iwo Jima.

* * *

Chapter Eleven

Since Deke had been critically wounded on Iwo Jima, and had died later while in the hospital at San Diego, it was acceptable in time of war for him to be buried at home, and not, as hundreds of other service men, in hastily dug warriors graves, or in cemeteries set aside as heroes burying grounds. So Barry and Vilma decided to give him a military funeral in the Magnolia Hill cemetery which was located on the outskirts of Brandon.

For me, it was the end of the world.

The night before the funeral, I lay on the bed in my room in the darkness demented with grief. I did not have the courage to keep a light burning, for light meant life, and I wanted to be dead, like Deke, to lie beside him in blackness of the grave.

Despite his death, and the funeral pall which hung over the house, mama and daddy had been in an argument since supper, and the stealthy quietness was occasionally punctuated with her sharp outcries or his muffled, masculine undertones. They had not gotten along since she had burned the summerhouse, and the news of Deke's death brought on their argumentative climax.

Matt had gone about her duties, sullen, perturbed, cowed as if she was going to be struck at any moment. And I had retired to my room, not entirely to escape their monotonous verbal battles, but to be as close to Deke as humanly possible. Many times during the past he had spent weekends with me, or me with him, and just to know that he had lain in my bed, that once I had remained awake just to listen to his contented breathing, lent me a semblance of solace, a toxin for my disheveled nerves.

I lay in the darkness, with only the dim frames of the windows making a shape out of my tormented world, tears streaming down my face, dripping off onto my pillow, and thought of him in life...not death. I could not picture him lying in a casket,

prepared for burial, not Deke, my warmhearted, passionate Deke, and I wrestled with my thoughts on whether I should view him before he was put into the cold ground. I knew I could not. One glance at his handsome face, so sifted of life, so cold, so still, and I knew I would go into convulsions.

My remorse was abruptly broken by the torturing sounds of daddy pounding on mama's bedroom door . . . a door locked and barred from his entrance, and I tried desperately to summon up a tinge of feelings for him, but I could not. All my thoughts, all my concern, all my promised desperations were for Deke, though he could not claim them.

"Please, Carlotta," I heard him pleading, then more knocking. "Let's go to sleep. We shouldn't be carrying on like this before . . . before the funeral."

There was no answer. Then a long, tormenting silence. I thought of Deke, sniffed spasmodically. Daddy knocked again, the rapping like the sad sounds of an old poem.

"Sleep in the summerhouse!" came her shrieking voice from the other side of the hall.

I jumped.

"But it's burned," daddy answered, as if he didn't believe it, but believed only her . . . who had forgotten . . . or had she? Vaguely I considered she was only tormenting him.

Silence again. Deke! You're not really dead you? My heart cried repeatedly. There was a shuf of feet in the hall, near my door. It opened, daddy's voice murmured from the darkness.

"Bebe . . . are you asleep?"

"No sir," I answered.

He felt his way to the bed and slipped in be me. I shifted my weight to give him room.

"I won't stay long," he apologized, and breathing came heavy, perplexed. "A minute or gotta be around someone, then I'll crap out on sofa."

"Stay . . . please," I found myself saying, strangely I seemed like a child again, and no grown young man; warmed and spellbound by powerful nearness.

"I wish to God she would forget all this m between me and Barry . . . between you and Dek he whispered, letting out a troubled sigh.

"Mama doesn't want to forget," I said, solv the problem in a few words. "She thrives on unhappiness."

"I thought Deke dying would stop her." waited a moment before he spoke again, as if co sidering. "But now that he's gone, now that he's of the picture, no longer a threat to her, she's ba on me and Barry again."

"Deke's dying won't stop her. Only her ow

death," I said slowly, steeped in my eternal loss, and realizing painfully that nothing no one could do, not even God, could ever bring him back to me.

"Oh, she's raving about that too," he said.

I added sarcastically.

"Is it something she and her God have talked over about the way Deke went . . . she wants to change that too?"

"Bebe . . . she's afraid you're going to create a spectacle at the funeral tomorrow . . . like I did when she forced me to stop seeing Barry. This . . . Deke getting killed . . . is bringing all that back to her. She just won't give up."

"I ought to carry widows weeds and wear black," I said ironically, wanting to hurt her the way she had hurt me. "Would serve her right. I ought to bawl and faint and swoon over the casket." And I thought: "I might too, the way I felt."

"Bebe."

"Yes."

"Would you promise me something?"

I could not refuse him anything, so I said I would do anything he asked.

"I know it's going to be rough on you tomorrow but, for her sake, brace up. If you have to bawl, bawl tomorrow night, here in your room when you are alone. I'll understand. Just try and put up a good front, as if Deke's passing affects you only as that

of a close friend. Carlotta's wringing her
frightened out of her wits that you will do som
at the funeral that will start the neighbors gos
all over again."

"Everything for mama," I said bitterly, t
to face the faint glowing windows, gauging sadl
weather outside and hopeful that it would let
time for the funeral. Deke hated bad weather
cold, and I wanted it to be a sunshiny day.

"Oh, Bebe, just for tomorrow," he insisted,
ing to face me. Then, like in my younger da
high school when I was weary from athletic trai
he began to massage my shoulders, his huge, p
ful hands pressing firmly into every muscle,
crevice down my spine. Strangely, I felt like a
again, and I hoped that he would never stop.
warm breath on the nape of my neck was like
fragrance of wine, and his nearness, in this dark r
lent me the security, the safety I needed.

"You know I'm not going to be a fool," I
hoarsely, engulfed in his deep kindness. "Deke
long ago in my heart, died the minute he left for
Marines. Mama will be spared her reputation.
won't have to worry about me acting like a s
grieving girl. I'm old enough to know that he is g
. . . that he is never coming back."

With weariness and heartbreak undermining

strength, and with the needed feelings daddy provoked within me, I began to sob. All my pent up emotions, the grief, the loneliness without Deke these many months, gathered, breaking the dam of my reserve, and the tears gushed out, like corruption from a festered wound.

"Go ahead, boy, cry . . . cry all you want to, daddy said thoughtfully, patting me on the neck, and, when I could not halt the steady stream, he gathered me into his massive arms and held his face close to mine. "Cry it all out," he went on, his lips brushing my cheek. "Then you'll feel better. Get it out of your system." He paused, choked. "I wish I could have cried like that when I had to give up Barry, but she was always around, day and night, and I've kept it bottled up all these years, just waiting . . ."

Suddenly, I felt sorry for him, from the bottom of my heart, but I could find no proper words, so wrought I was inside from my own personal grief.

"Why didn't you leave her?" I asked finally, finding words.

"I wanted to, and God knows, I almost left her several times, and would have if Barry had not already been married himself. But when you were born, Bebe, I stayed on for your sake. I figured I could give you the . . . er . . . love I felt for Barry."

This new sensation, that someone really wanted

me, needed me, lifted my spirit faintly, and I asked, child-like:

"Do you regret staying?"

"No, Bebe, no," he answered, pulling me close to him, the way Deke had done sometimes, though without passion, only with his deep love for me, his understanding. "I've worshiped just you all these years. And tonight . . . tonight I feel what you are feeling . . . what you are going through over Deke. I guess that's why Carlotta and I got into a fuss. I was all torn up, and she kept bringing up you and Deke, and him dead, and throwing Barry at me." He kissed me softly on the cheek, the sound of it audible in the still dark room, and I basked in his nearness. He was like an atonement, an expiation of wrong, the recompense of my prolonged suffering over Deke. "I know this is going to sound selfish," he murmured, deep throated, guttural. "But if some good can come from Deke's leaving us, I hope it will bring a final climax to all this unhappiness, the end to her horrid, unnatural accusations."

I considered slowly, profoundly what he had said.

"It's fodder for her," I added, in the bitterest of retaliations, for in a sense she was my rival, my enemy over Deke. "Mama would be utterly lost if she did not have something left in her crusade to save. We are her guinea pigs."

"We have just got to start giving over to her more after the funeral." he advised, but with a tone of voice which advertised his loathing for his own advice, as if his own wisdom was too complicated for him to fathom. "Maybe take a trip, or something, get away from it all."

His words, though not the sound of them, gnawed at my rebellion against her, especially now that I had lost Deke forever.

"I wouldn't mind giving over to her completely," I told him. "I wouldn't mind even marrying Laurie. I can go on now, living normally, now that Deke is gone...and there will never be another like him. But that I should always do what she says, just because she has said it, infuriates me, and robs me of my rights as a man. I have listened to her, daddy, and have moved aside my life and done as she asked, but what has it brought me? Misery, grief. And what has Deke gotten out of it? Death! And Barry and Vilma would never have made him join the service if it hadn't been for the way mama kept carrying on. How do you forgive a person as selfish as mama?"

"I don't know," he answered, sighing with the identical weariness, the disgust I felt. "I've asked myself that same question a million times or more. I keep telling myself that she is right, that she has been right all these unhappy years with her, and all because of my and Barry's relationship. I

realized that was wrong, that it wasn't normal. And I did want to be normal, to love her and to want her as a man should love and want a woman. And I believe in time that I would have loved her, but she wouldn't let me forget. She just kept sticking new holes in the wound, just wouldn't let it heal. Maybe she is jealous. Maybe she loves me that much."

"Oh, daddy," I cried, insensitive as all youth is. "Mama doesn't love anyone. She is cold, hard."

He stroked back my hair.

"No, you're wrong, Bebe. She does love, maybe too much. That's what's wrong with her. That is why I can't leave her. I don't have the heart to break her heart."

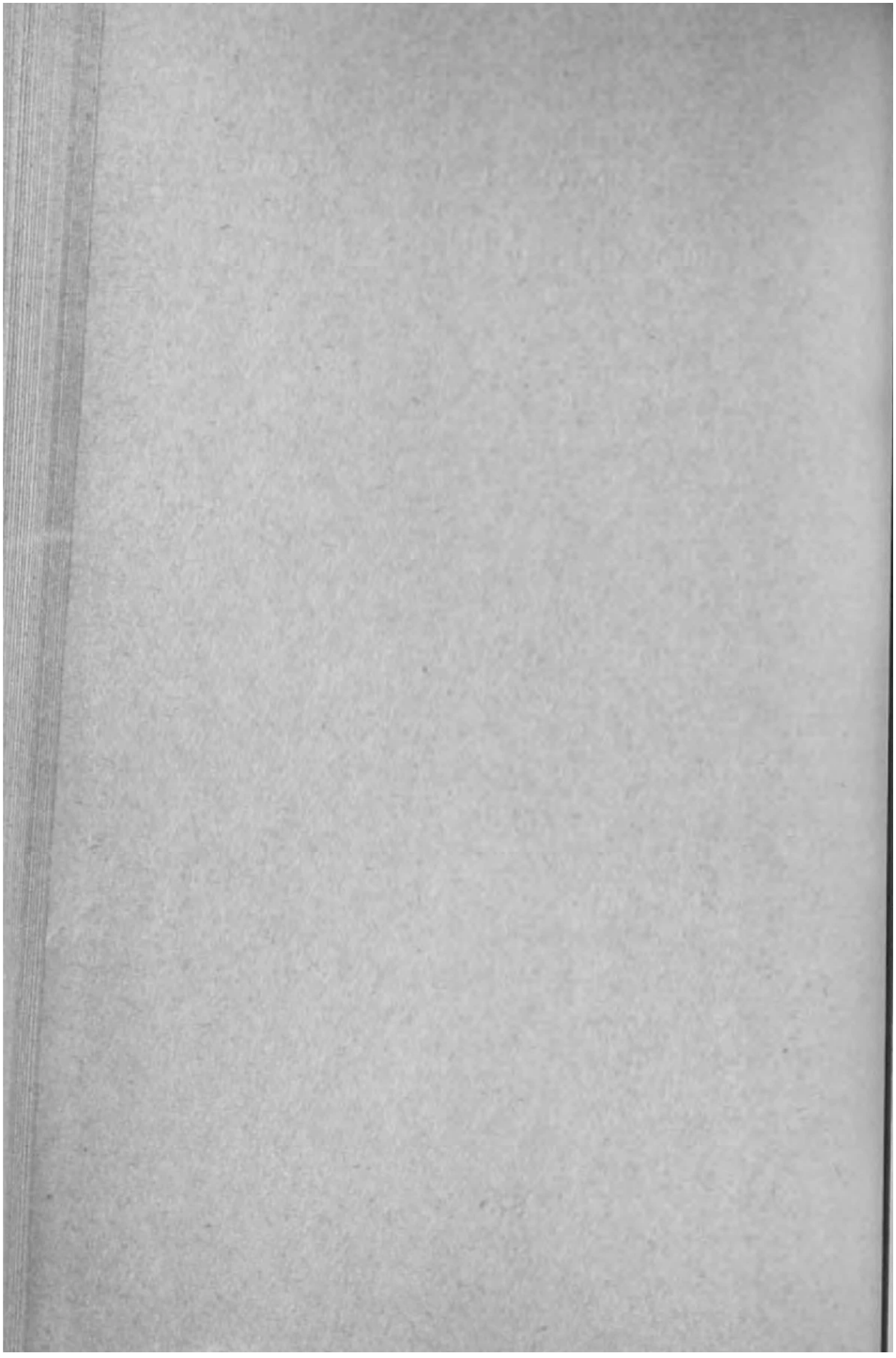
I failed desperately to understand him, though I wanted to, wanted to pull us together somehow, now that I no longer had Deke.

"She hated Deke," I said abruptly, jabbing the most lethal weapon I possessed, my last, final weapon of assault upon her.

"No, she didn't hate Deke," he corrected me, running his long fingers over my face, my lips, my neck. "She said . . . she said tonight, said; if only Deke was still alive, so Bebe wouldn't be so unhappy."

"Mama said that?"

He answered lowly. The realization of this truth between us brought on a limbo of silence and, under its healing spell, folded up into his strong, protective arms, I walked out of my dark valley of grief and fell into a watchful, tired sleep.



Chapter Twelve

Just before the funeral, I stood transfixed in Barry and Vilma's living room staring numbly out the Palladian windows. The panes were tinted, like the windows in a church, and the raindrops sticking to the glass resembled multi-colored jewels, topaz, rubies, emeralds, garnets.

A miserable day for a funeral, I thought heartbrokenly for the hundredth time, and turned, mannikin-like, and gazed at the opened casket on the other side of the room, flanked with flowers. Every hue in the rainbow were represented, frosty, pale, subluminous, some looking like they had been dipped in wax, others plumes of bright scarlet, serene above their garlands of lavender and white tulle.

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

In a chair near the hearth sat Vilma, mournful in black, and near her, seated on a polished Hitchcock bench, was Barry, his bowed head wan, colorless as if he suffered from an internal wound and all the blood had escaped from his body. His hand, going through his thick hair, shook, and unchecked tears made silver trails down each side of his face.

With them sitting there so close, the casket and its mountain of flowers, the room looked so small, so crowded with its elegant Chippendale chairs, the walnut secretary, the French fruitwood chest, when once, I remembered, it seemed so huge, vast, as impersonal as a lobby of a sumptuous hotel. It had always seemed impersonal to me, a little frightening, even when Deke was still alive and filled it with his magnetic personality . . . a personality that could warm a forest, a lake shore, a church or a gym, if he were in them. But even Deke could not stir this vast room to awakefulness, nor take the chill out of it, or make it feel in any way desirable or wanted.

The huge polished rafters, with emblazoned shields, hung from the gabled ceiling threatingly. The graying blue ash floors, with the enormous scatter rugs, reflecting with mirror accuracy every object in the room, make you feel that you were on a tossing, bottomless sea, a sea without a shore. And I felt that way now. I felt that, with Deke's passing, I had been cut from the meaningful proximi-

142 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

ty of life, and was now adrift, on the high seas without direction awaiting my own doom.

"We asked the two Marine guards to wait out in the hall so that we could talk to you," said Vilma, her dim voice sounding as if it came from the other side of the mountains.

"We want to be alone with you . . . for a moment," Barry whispered, taking up his cue on the death of her words.

"We want you to be with us . . . with Barry and I . . . and with Deke for a few minutes, before we have to meet all those people, those prying eyes, those tongues!"

At the sound of their quiet, hollow voices, I grew uneasy and, as if Deke was yet alive to guard and protect me, eager in death to defend as he had always been in life, I crossed the room and stood staring at him in the casket. He looked so still, so cold, so utterly lost.

"Whatever you might say to me, whatever you may think," I said passively, my voice firm, final. "It makes no difference now. No one, not even God, can hurt me, humiliate me, infuriate me. I am beyond all that now . . . way beyond all that."

"Oh! Bebe, we have no wish to offend," Vilma spoke up, as she and Barry rose from their chairs and came to me, almost simultaneously, and stood closely on each side of me, their gaze too petrified

on the immobile face that touched so deeply
out the efforts of life.

Barry put his arm around my shoulder, his
gripping my neck in a warm, firm grip.

"Bebe . . . what Vilma and I want to say is
. . . that we understand how you and Deke felt a
each other, and we know that he would want
with us."

"We want you to remain with the family
the grave site," Vilma murmured, her voice tremul
She lay a hand on my dark sleeve. "We want
to sit with us at the church as one of the fan
Deke, he would want that. And we want you
For Barry and I love you, Bebe. We always h
always will. No matter what you are . . . what D
was. He was ours, and we loved him with all
love possible in parents. And we love you too, Be
Don't ever forget that. I say that now, in the prese
of Deke, so that wherever you go in the future
can look back and say our words were true."

I managed to utter thanks, feeling very cl
very profound to them both but, came unwill
thoughts and reprimands from mama, and dadd
wish that I give in to her as much as possible.

"I appreciate you wanting me to be with
family," I said, considering if it was possible for
to be any closer to Deke than I already was. "But
but I don't want to place you in an imposition."

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

"You won't, my boy," Barry assured me, his eyes more truthful than his words. "It's what Vilma and I both want."

"It will be an honor to have you walk beside us," said Vilma, taking out her handkerchief and sniffing grievously. "This is our last hour with him . . . the last thing we can do for him . . . that would please him so much. He was all heart." She patted my hand. "But you knew that, didn't you, Bebe?"

I nodded, my heart in my eyes as I gazed on the quiet bland face of Deke for the last time. All that we had ever done together flashed before my mind. Yes, he was all heart, giving so much, asking for nothing in return. And I should know these things. No one except me had known the wonder of him, wondered with him, understood. No one except me had gone into the dark secrecy of his inner most being, had discovered his treasure trove of mysticism, his grandiose air, his masculine coquetry, his creamy power, his quixotic caprice. I knew these things about him profoundly. I knew, and having known, marveled at them. I had become intoxicated on them. I had discovered myself through these marvelous invisible toys with which we played.

"We want you to have his car," Barry whispered, taking the all too familiar set of keys from his coat pocket and thrusting them into my hand.

"But I couldn't . . . I just couldn't," I stam-

145 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

mered, realizing all too painfully that the very sight of it would haunt me. The very memory of it, the places we had gone in it, the things we had done in it while parked on some lonely road, near the lake, set my heart throbbing with grievous pain. "It wouldn't be right. You should keep it, Barry, you and Vilma. I have no right to it."

His hands over mine, enclosing the keys, hurt.

"You have every right. More right than Vilma or I could or will ever have. Deke always joked about the Jaguar being yours and his. So, we want you to take it . . . to please Deke."

My tortured eyes caught his and for a brief moment of pain I read the solemn truth there, in the tiny twin lights that burned with an agony as old as legacy. He truly meant what he said. So I placed the keys in my overcoat pocket and thanked them unselfishly. I looked at Deke, saw through his death the good hearted essence of his life, and I knew this was right. It would make them happy if I accepted. They wanted to do something for me, because Deke had loved me, and they knew he had loved me.

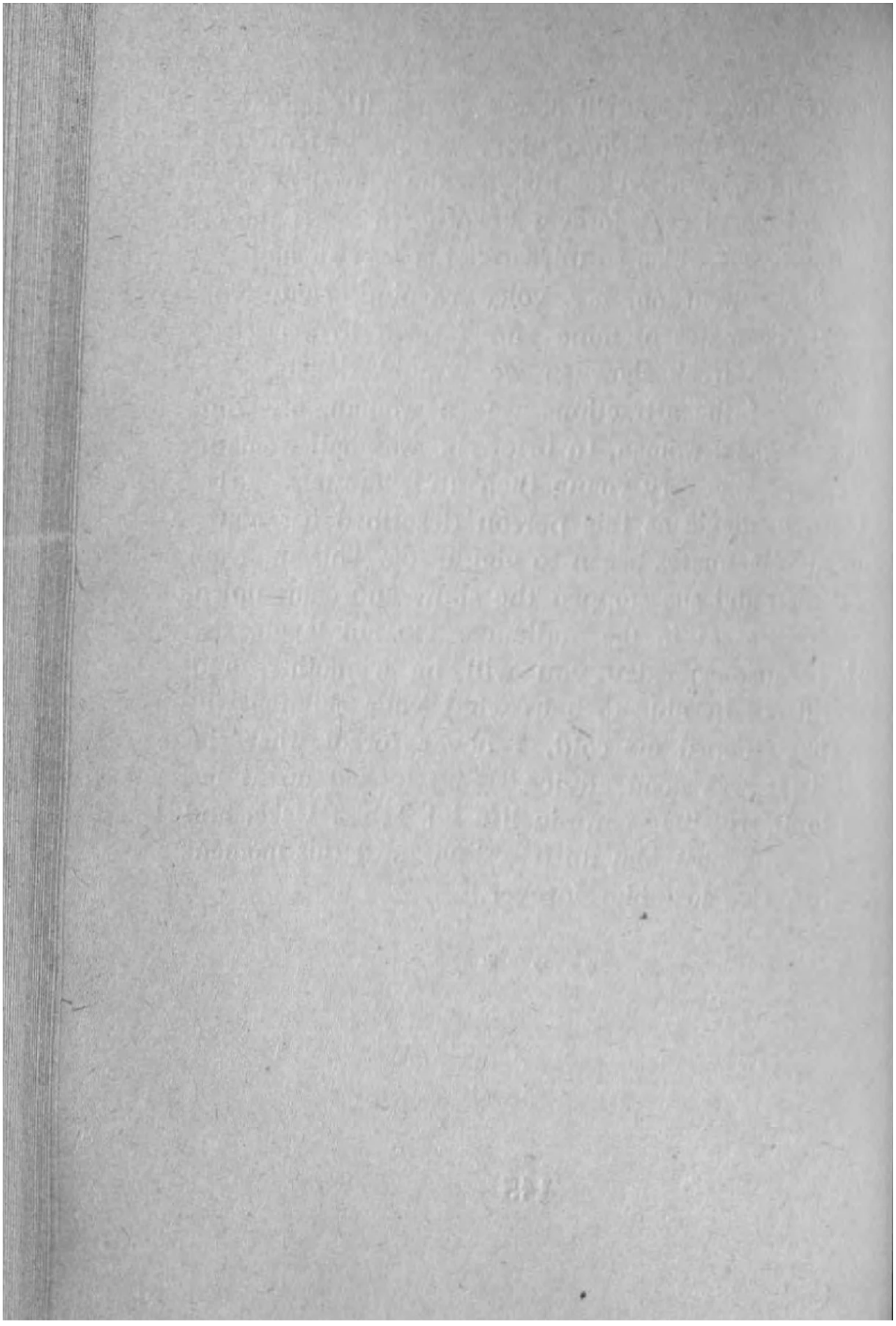
Unconsciously or, semi-consciously, Vilma lay trembling fingers over Deke's brow, stroked back his unruly curls, as if they still maintained a waif of life.

"I wish I could have understood him," she said, drawing in a quick, indulgent breath. "While he lived.

Why did I have to wait till now . . . when it's too late. I maybe could have helped him . . . more." Her face was as frozen, as fixed as his, as she stared at the casket, his closed eyes, forever keeping in secret those glittering jewels which so mirrored his every emotion. "Once," she went on, her voice rasping, contusive, "several classmates of mine and I went to a circus. There was a freak show so we bought tickets.

"One of the attractions was a woman, or, who I thought was a woman. In brief she was half woman, half man. I was very young then and, like most girls, I began to giggle as this person described her anatomy. My classmates began to giggle too. This annoyed the woman and she stopped the show and came down to where we sat in the audience. Do not laugh, she said, because someday you will be a mother, and you will not be able to help what your children will be. That stopped me cold. I never forgot what she said. That was good advice." She looked up at me then to Barry. "How ironic life is! I had Deke, and I've never known him until today, until this moment . . . when I've lost him forever."

* * *



Chapter Thirteen

After the funeral I took the Jaguar and drove down to the lake. I had to have a little time to myself. I could not endure the silence of daddy, the damnation of mama, not just yet. Daddy's deep sympathy would provoke unwanted tears. And mama's accusations would trigger the things I had wanted to say to her since Deke had joined the Marines, going out of my life, forever.

I got into the little boat, pushed it from the wharf

with the paddle, and headed out into the wind chu
lake. Overhead, following like dark sheep driven
the fold, enormous purple clouds loomed threaten
ly, boding rain.

At mid-lake, I drew in the oars and let the b
bobble for a while. I looked down at the dark, mov
water. It looked so frightful, so mournful, the fra
waves, lapping at the sides of the boat, gave
terrible, awesome sounds. I shivered at the thou
of it, watched in my suicide mood the terrifying de
of it, and longed that it swallow me up, boat, o
and all, and leave no trace of my existence.

I could barely make out the shoreline on eit
side of me, mere thin line of green. There was no
in sight. I was alone on this immense death trap.
sat, my arms folded, my black overcoat draped ov
my shoulder, my eyes glued on the lapping, shi
water. I thought again of the funeral, going numb
between Vilma and Barry, directly behind the pa
bearers in the church, flanked by Marine guards
their resplendent blue uniforms, saw mama's piercin
eyes again as I passed her along the aisle. I shivere
How cold were those eyes, so cold they froze m
heart. I thought of the burial, the long line of peop
hobbling along in the misting rain, the difficult
the pallbearers had getting the flower banked ca
ket through the little wrought iron gate, the far awa
voice of the preacher, the sinking of the casket int

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

the ground, the silence . . . the terrible silence afterward. The sighing of the chill wind through the pines. A dove, with its hollow, grievous notes from the top of a dead sycamore. Vilma's muffled sobs.

Yet . . . Deke was dead. I knew that now. I knew, I think, when the riflemen, those gallant Marines clad in blue, fired three times over the gravesite, knew as I stood for a brief second alone watching how the heavy raindrops beat the delicate petals of the flowers into the soft red mud.

He was truly dead. He was gone, and I knew now that I would never see him again, would never see his twinkling eyes studying me, would never hear him talk nor sing nor laugh. Death had taken all but my memory of him . . . and how sweet to have that now, to ponder that life, which was as dead as the flowers of a departed summer.

The concussion of the waves breaking in the wind fell with muffled thuds, like bodies falling . . . like my own tortured body, falling, falling . . . falling.

I longed to die, to fling my body into the dark water, to be washed hither and thither, like one thrashing about in a black hellfire, damned by ones sins, to be driven and crashed about the roots of the underworld, to become entangled in them, choked into oblivion.

Thoughts of Deke stabbed at me, the sweetness of him overflowing, and that lost sweetness ran down

151 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

the walls of my mind, locking all understanding. Unconsciously, I moved to the edge of the boat. My hands, cold and death white, gripped the rails. It was the end, because I wanted it to be the end . . . the dark end to everything, which would be preferable to the dark emptiness of life.

I all but leaped. Then a clap of thunder rides down the sky. Light, brighter than mid-day, threw a white shield over the surface of the lake. Hurled back to my senses, I picked up the oars and rowed toward the opposite shore. When I reached the wharf, guiding in amidst the tall lavender pickerel weed, the wind was high in the live oaks, sweeping the long tendrils of moss like a moving army of ghosts.

Like one gone mad, I walked. Restless, driven on by my grief, seeing Deke's face, a dark face now trooping back from my past, I skirted the shoreline, between the woods and the water, as if balanced recklessly on a thin thread of life. Overhead, the purple clouds gathered into one monstrous shape, herded on aimlessly by the fierce wind, dropping altitude as they floated ponderously, like a balloon above the head of a lost, bewildered child.

Where I was going I did not know. Had no way of knowing. Only that I wanted frantically to walk out my grief, to be alone with my torments until all the poison was drained from my system. I wanted to shake the past, now that I realized that Deke was

truly dead, wanted some tangible substance on which I could get a hand hold back to my future.

I hurried recklessly along the sand bank, that long curving white line, with the black water churning to my left and the shimmering fields of golden heather to my right. And when I reached higher ground, where an old abandoned stone quarry had left an abundance of huge lime stones, one heaped upon the other, the rain began to fall in torrents. Thunder and lightening rented the sky, and the minute flashes of light, then purple darkness, lent a terrible nightmare quality to my every surroundings.

Remembering an old cave where Deke and I had visited during our younger days, I located it without too much difficulty and ran inside. Actually, it had been a well, dug from the top side of the hill beyond, and the rough water in time had eaten out the cave to the point where the well rose vertical to the top of the hill and the sky. Standing directly under it, I looked up curiously, saw the dark clouds racing past, then flashes of lightning, followed by rapid explosions of thunder.

I sat down wearily on a huge outcropping of rock and waited out the rain. But it continued in blinding sheaths, the sound of it roaring like an enormous tidal wave, and waves of water lashed out at each other as they gushed into the opening of the cave. Soon, to my dismay, the floor of the cave was

covered with water, and it continued to rise, inch by inch, foamed over with white, in its eternal struggle to reach its level.

At first, I gave it little thought. Then, I began to realize my predicament. If it continued to rise, it would soon fill the cave entirely, reaching the level of the roof, and my only escape would be in my agility to climb the vertical shaft of the well to the opening at the top of the hill.

Thoughts of Deke, the funeral, my grief, my own desire to commit suicide vanished to the back of my mind as my own life, my own safety flashed to the fore. Nothing concerned me then but my own survival, and I stood up on the rock and watched nervously as the water below rose higher and higher, up to the ceiling of the cave, then to the soles of my shoes. I looked up at the vertical shaft, noticed with a new terror how the rain had made shiny silver streams down the sides of the well, making it all the more difficult to climb.

At the unexpected sight, and at my own stupidity for getting myself into such a trap, I all but panicked

Wild now for life, not death, not premeditated suicide in order to join Deke in his long dark sleep, I caught madly for the outcropping rocks directly above me and pulled myself up. The rocks were slippery and, losing my grip, I fell back. I tried again, then again. The fourth time my hands held, and I

pulled my weight up until I could throw one leg up over the rock, then another. Then, inch by inch, foot by foot, I struggled upward against the vertical wall of mud and rock.

It was a slow, arduous task. Slipping back, my shoes digging deep trenches into the wall, my hands grabbing at the sharp rocks until they bled. Up . . . up . . . up, painstakingly hazardous, for one fatal slip and I would crash against the jagged stones below.

I prayed. My whole life swept before me in nightmare visions. I had frantic apprehensions, saw daddy's fear-ridden face, then mama's . . . cold, white, drawn. Then, out of my own terror, my mind gone berserk, I saw the pale face of Deke at the top of the shaft, saw his hand reaching down, clamorous to pull me free. Death freeing the living from death.

I began to sob, and my body became a maddening pulsation, as I groped blindly for stone after stone, twisting, pivoting, using my legs as a fulcrum with which to lift my weight inch by inch, until my grasping fingers could clutch something solid, could hold. Catching my breath, I would brace myself by placing my shoulders against one wall and my rigid legs against the opposite, then inch my way up.

At last, with the desperation of Deke's face covering the top of the well, vanishing with the light, I lifted my weary body up and over the edge. Heaving for breath, I lay in the soft grass on the hill, on

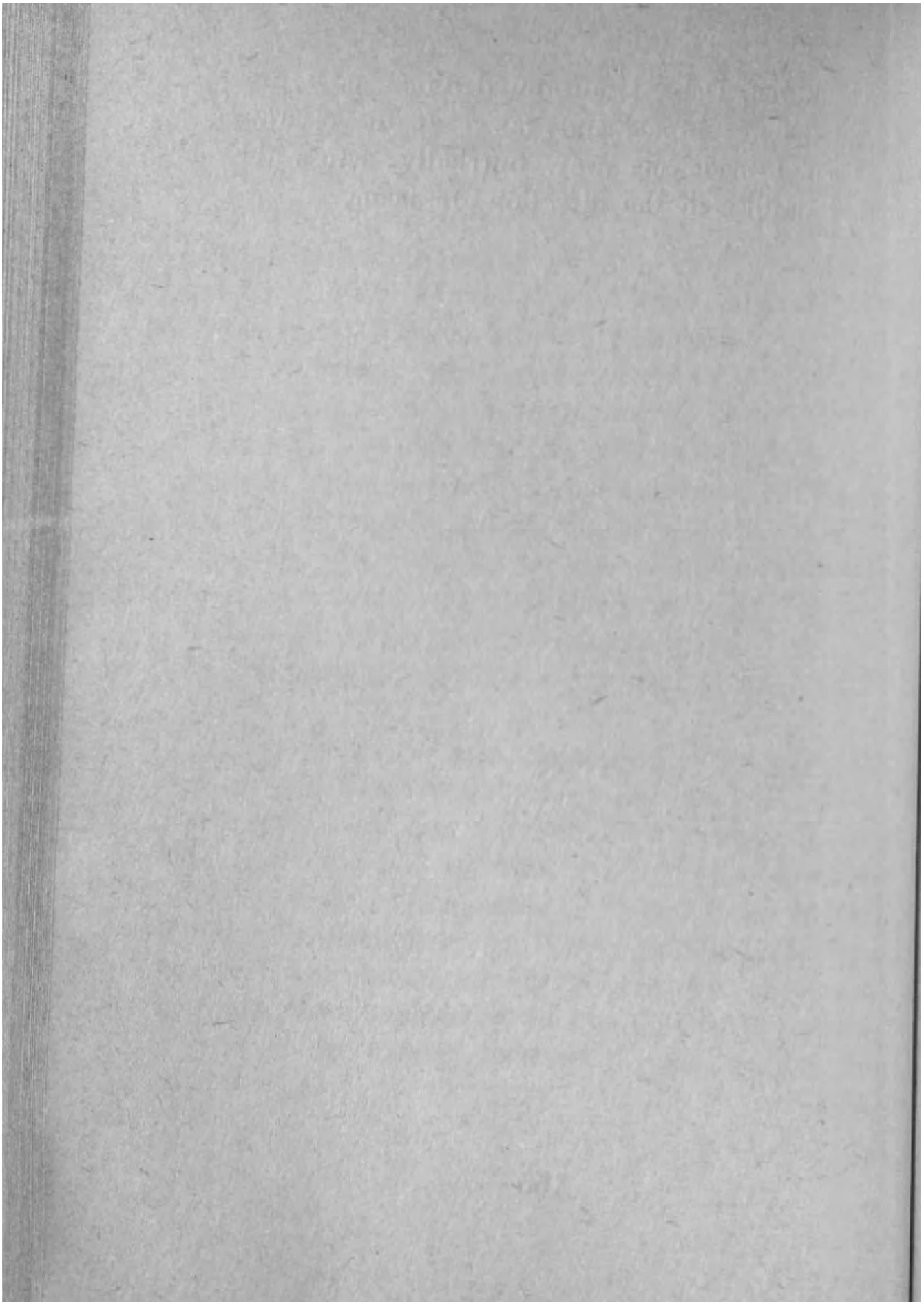
top of this hard-gained heaven, and it seemed to rise to the very edge of the sky. I lay, listening to my breathing, my eyes tracing the scudding clouds which, ironically, were edged in bits of gold from the sun which tried desperately to peep through. They floated silently above me like a dream, a dream out of my childhood past, when I had lain on my back forming cloud pictures. And I thought:

A moment ago I had wanted to take my own life, to join Deke in his dark, eternal grave. I wanted to give up, to sink into the oblivion of life I would have to endure in the future without him. And it was Deke, the image I had of him there at the top of the well, who had pulled me out of my desolation of heart, who had reached down with his love, his strength of mind, his understanding, and had lifted my thoughts out of that soggy mire of grief, of life profaned.

I could go on now, somehow, without him. He was dead and he would always be dead. He would never come back. But his love, his memory, that pure remembrance I had of him, would give me strength to go on, to pick up the new life without him. He had brought me back from the dark, haunting alleyways of death, had shown me the way to live again, and I would always be grateful to him. He had come back from death for a brief moment to light the way for me.

Thank you, Deke, I murmured aloud, as I rose up from the wet ground and gazed at the clearing sky. Then I made my way hurriedly across the drenched heather in the direction of home.

* * *



Chapter Fourteen

Deke's death brought the moth fluttering around the candle. We lived in dread. We cowed in fear that something more dreadful, if that was possible to me, was destined to take place.

His passing made of life a dream. And everyone of us who loved him feared an awakefulness would kill us. And the awakefulness came in April, that time of year when life is heralded into a new rejuvenation, the time of the rising of Christ after His entombment.

Barry vanished, and four days following his dis appearance, two teenage boys, while fishing in Hoove lake, found his bloated body floating in the shallow near the wharf in front of the Banjo cabin.

It was concluded that he had drowned accidentl when his small boat had overturned, but speculation had it otherwise . . . that he had taken his own life. For those who knew him realized that he was an excellent swimmer, and that the weather in no way had affected the placidity of the water.

"He never got over having Deke put into the Marines," Vilma related, all but numbed into collapse. "He kept saying it was all his fault . . . that Deke would still be alive if he had not been so impatient with him. He worshiped Deke. When he went, he took everything. My love was never enough to hold him. He had nothing else to live for. So he killed himself. I know . . . he killed himself because he could not live with his shame."

"Don't say that, Vilma," daddy implored, as we sat in that enormous living room for the second time and viewed, with dismay, another similar casket foamed over with flowers. "Barry wouldn't take his own life, no matter what happened."

"But he did," she said dryly, her voice flat, final. "He idolized Deke . . . loved him far too much for a father to love a son. It wasn't natural. No man should love a son the way Barry loved Deke. The

burden he carried after Deke had to go overseas and fight was enough on him to break any man, and Deke's getting killed finished the job. He just didn't want to go on. The night before he disappeared he said to me, "Vilma, I hear voices. I think I am going mad."

* * *

We all went mad . . . Vilma, mama, daddy, and me.

Vilma with her defiant silence, mama with her terrible religion, daddy with his heartbreak, and me with my desperation for freedom.

Something about Deke's death, not from our grieving, that was natural, but from some awesome power, which triggered our lives into this unexpected turn, which gave motive to our actions and galvanized that action into its tragis mosaic.

Firstly, daddy left mama. Then I, too, left . . . left mama and Mock Orange Hollow, that lovely home which had born and sheltered me all these years, for the highroads of a free life. If daddy was not at home to help shield me from mama's damnations, her profaned contempt, her deplorable impression of me, home to relieve some of the agony, the pain, the loneliness . . . now that Deke was dead . . . I could not endure it one moment.

The night Dad left he slipped a letter under my bedroom door. It was simple and brief, but it gave me heart.

It read:

If you need anything, ever, Bebe, I am in suite 505 *at the Robert E. Lee hotel in Jackson.*

I feel I am built up of phases, one stacked on the other, like plates in a waiter's hand. And that there must be one phase out of them all which dictates to me to be alone. After Barry, I can no longer tolerate Carlotta. Forgive me.

Love

—— Dad

Chapter Fifteen

Immediately, I packed my things, and the next morning after breakfast I said good-bye to mama. I had no inkling where I was going, what I would do, but I had to leave. Like daddy, I could no longer tolerate this house, mama, the silence, the boredom, the complete, monotonous boredom without Deke.

When she saw my shiny ox-blood travel cases, my books, she took one long deliberate look, and her face waned to a death white. She gazed then at me, completely taken by surprise, and there was a hurt look about her eyes, her lips, her figure which seemed haggard, old.

"You're going to Walter," she declared, rather answering her own question, and there was a tone of bitterness in her voice, defiance. "So you are both leaving me."

"Mama, I should have left long ago," I answered, not looking at her, pretending at fidgeting with my things.

"Why?" she asked, abruptly, in that sharp, demanding way of hers.

"I'm a grown man," I said, straightening to my full height. "It's time I got out, made my own way."

"That's not the main reason," she corrected me. She had a way of reading me like a book. "You're high-tailing it off to Walter, for you know he'll take up for you, coddle you, like he's always done."

I gave her a direct look

"I'm just leaving, mama. And whatever you say, whatever you accuse me of won't matter. My mind's made up."

"You and Walter! You always did pair off against me. You and him on one side and me on the other."

"You know that isn't so."

"Now you've made it understood behind my back to meet somewhere, to plan your little campaign against me."

"I have no plans to meet daddy anywhere. I just want to leave, leave this house . . . you!"

That weakened something within her, tore the

thick fiber of her reserves, and she moved nearer to me, her arms out imploringly.

"Bebe . . . don't you no longer care . . . for Mock Orange Hollow . . . for me?"

I choked. She was deliberately making it more difficult.

"Mama . . . yes I care. I'll always love the house, you, but . . . but, something is wrong. Something is missing . . . now that Deke . . . "

"I'm sorry about him," she whispered, almost in tears, interrupting before I could finish what I was saying. "I'm truly sorry."

Her cheap masquerade at remorse infuriated me.

"You're glad Deke is dead, mama! Out of your way . . . out of my life. Glad, because now you think you can handle me anyway you see fit. While he lived, you knew you didn't stand a chance with me."

Her face furrowed with wrinkles, and her eyes glared enormously, as though from inner pain.

"Oh, Bebe, you're wrong, terribly wrong. I never wanted Deke to get killed. I . . . I was very fond of him . . . "

"Oh, God, mama! Spare me your lies!"

"Bebe, I did care. I've always liked Deke, since he was a baby," she went on, unheeded. "I just wanted you to live like a man, to marry, father children, and to have Deke as a friend."

"Oh, mama, don't . . . don't," I cried, turning my face from her steadfast gaze, a gaze filled with accusation, ridicule for my and Deke's relation. "It's all over, and I want to forget it."

I looked back at her then and suddenly, something of quiet relief flooded her pale face, lit her eyes with a new, sparkling light.

"That's what I want, Bebe, to forget it . . . to forget everything but you and Walter and this house, and all of us together, like it used to be. I'm proud that you want that too. Now, things can be easier for us all. We'll get Walter back . . . start over . . . a new beginning."

I looked at her for a moment, wondering whether to tell her the truth or to bland over the truth with a placid lie.

"Thanks, but no thanks," I answered finally, fighting time, so that I could leave this house, her, before she said something that would lure me back, compel me to stay.

"Bebe." she whispered, her voice rasping, her hand over her heart. "I know you are heartbroken now, embittered, but in time you'll get over it. We all do. In time you'll forget ever knowing anyone like Deke, or having cared . . . so much."

"Indeed." I replied hotly, considering her the most stupid of women if she thought I could ever forget Deke. "I'll never forget him, nor stop loving

him, or thinking about him, till the day I die."

"All right then," she advised, taken back. "But Bebe, do it here, here in this house, at Mock Orange Hollow, with me, with Walter to help ease the pain, and not somewhere alone, or among strangers."

"I don't know," I said, thinking the matter over. There was a degree of truth in what she said, but everything here . . . in this house, the remembrance of Deke . . . was spoiled for me now, and I longed to tear myself free, to escape into new, completely new alleyways.

"Give us this chance," she went on, imploringly. "Let us help you mend your grief, if you love . . . cared for him so much. Let us be beside you while you are heartbroken. Let us share your unhappiness. Then, someday, when it is over, we will all three rise out and above it like new, and be glorified that we shared it."

"Mama," I said, feeling her words, the desperate sound of her voice pulling at my every conviction, robbing me of my decision, the quiet alcove I must seek . . . alone. "What you say sounds all right, and don't think me ungrateful or obstinate because I refuse, but you and daddy have your life and I have mine, and I no longer want to sit here and jaw back and forth with you day in and day out. I've become stagnated, and its time I learned to shoulder the burdens of life for myself, without your

and daddy's help." Then I thought of Deke, our love, our haunted alcoves, our esthetic retreats. "I just can't bear looking at these walls any longer, seeing him, knowing he won't ever come back. I've got to go, or I too will go mad like Barry and end up doing something desperate."

She gazed at me, a long searching look.

"Then you truly mean what you say... that you're leaving, and will never come back?"

"I'll come back... someday," I tried to assure her, uncertain of my own future, but wanting her to think that I was certain, independent to all but myself. "When I've found a job, a position, then I'll come back and visit you... and Matt."

Tears welled up in her eyes and she looked beyond me, a far off look, as if she saw something or someone on the opposite side of the room. Her face was etched with pain and, worse than pain, a deep sadness that gnawed its way to the deepest recesses of my heart.

"How can I bear it?" she said, her voice trembling. "With both you and Walter gone? What am I to do... in this house alone? You and Walter have been my whole life. Your wants, your happiness have been my wants, my happiness. I've never had a life, except you and Walter and now that too is being taken away, and there is nothing to live for, to work for!"

Firefox https://online.fliphtml5.com/ywmj/fybu/

"Your God, mama," I assured her, but without sarcasm.

She jerked her head up, searching my face, my expression, then looked away again, sadly, and I regretted saying what I did.

"Do, I still have that?" she whispered, her gaze distant, lost. Even He has forsaken me!"

I looked at her puzzled, unable to understand her, her religion which she had clung to so desperately all these years but was now so ruthlessly discarding, like a worn, faded garment.

"I feel now that I have been wrong somehow," she answered. "With Walter gone and you going, I feel that I have relied on God for an answer to all this, and that he has gone to your side, has taken up his white banner in your defense. So . . . I've lost him too."

"No . . . you were right," I said, as my mind whirled with the shame of Deke's and my relationship, the things we had done with each other, the repulsive way we had loved, repulsive as it must be in her eyes. her world, not mine.

Suddenly, as if all the strength in her body had swept away, she sank to her knees on the soft wine colored carpet and lifted her arms to me. The gesture broke my heart.

"Bebe," she cried softly, but with urgency in her voice. "If you must go you will, no matter what

169 of 196 5/10/25, 6:58 PM

I say, no matter what I do, but please, before you go will you promise me something . . . please?"

I nodded, my eyes blinded with tears.

"If you know where Walter is, please go to him for me. Ask him to come back. Tell him for me that I am sorry for all that has happened. Tell him I beg his forgiveness, that I have been wrong about something. Tell him that I love him, that I need him, that I cannot go on without him. Will you do this for me, Bebe, will you, please?"

She began to sob, sinking to the carpet with a rustling of her skirt, her proudness in the dust at my feet, her old haughtiness fled, her wiles vanquished, a new humbleness taking their place. She was no longer the majestic, dominating queen who ruled Mock Orange Hollow with a tyrannical rule, but a broken, defeated exile, robbed of her reign, her throne, her very ego.

Reaching down, all forgiving, I lifted her up and held her closely in my arms.

"I'll go to him, mama," I told her. "I'll try and get him to come back."

* * *

Chapter Sixteen

I left mama standing in the middle of our huge living room like a statue rising out of a wine colored sea, and found old Matt awaiting me on the front gallery in tears.

"Yo doan haff to go runnin' off, Mist Bebe," she cried hoarsely, wiping her eyes on her apron. "Wiff Mist Walter already gone to God knows whar, an folks dyin' and folks grievin'."

"I've got to, Matt," I whispered, patting her on the hand. "I'll write, let you know how things are . . . when you can expect me home . . . will let you know when you can have that fried chicken and banana pudding ready."

She looked at me, her black shiny face polished from tears, her double chin trembling, looked at me imploringly, as if my leaving would break her enormous heart.

"Dis ain't no home no mo," she lamented sadly, her huge black hands fumbling with her apron. "Dis is a house of hell."

"I know, Matt, I know," I agreed, thinking of mama, Deke, Barry, the quarrels, the disappointments, the heartbreaks. I looked out over the lawn, past the gleaming white columns of the porch, the soft carpet of grass where I had romped as a child, the gnarled oaks dripping with moss, the dovecote swarming with fluttering pigeons. And I thought: how can I really leave it . . . for good? Here, everything I had ever loved were accumulated in one heavenly unison, the steep slope of the lawn, under the trees, to the front pasture which lay along the main highway, the paddocks where frolicked daddy's sleek thoroughbreds, the dark green magnolia beside the gallery, the echoing mockers in the tall pines, the borders of flaming Buddha camellias, the haunting mountains of dogwood, the mists of lavender redbuds high up in the tender limbs of the trees, the climbing bougainvillea, the dripping wisteria, the fragrance of the honeysuckle which foamed over every fence, up every tree, and draped like funeral wreathes over the roof and eaves of the garage, and mama's

prim little round flower beds that dappled the pine needled lawn like patchwork rugs, dancing with lady's-slippers, dahlias, gardenias, azaleas, daffodils, phlox, and the masculine sprays of Spanish boyonet, charged by the sun, which set at each corner of the house, and along the long curving carriage drive to the road. All this I saw, drank with my tortured eyes as I stood beside the sniffing Matt, and with it the fond image of Deke, who had roamed here beneath its shadows, who had lived and loved it as much or more than I.

"Please doan leave," Matt insisted, continuing with her rueful submission. "Miss Carlotta need yo ... dis ole nigger need yo mo den yo ever realizes."

With a last pat of her twitching hands I went down the shallow steps, hurriedly taking myself away from the old haunts which, brought back to life by Matt's woeful tears, might provoke me into crying, to relapse into a convulsion. And I wanted to get away, to break clean, before memories of the place, of her and mama held me back. But as I made my way to the little pink Jaguar I heard her cry after me, a cry which stopped me cold.

"Could yo help it, mist Bebe if'n yo loved Mist Deke, could yo help it? Why all de fuss? Didn't John loves Jesus, and nobody seemed to mind dat."

I got into the car quickly and drove down the drive. And as I turned north onto the main highway

I pondered judiciously that, here was a wisdom which had echoed out of the deep dark heart of Africa, a wisdom flung out and beyond the white man's civilization, an understanding of man, his baser instincts, an inducement alien to the white mind. She had known. She had understood. And she had regarded the involvement as an instinctive part of the race, a thing so natural she could pin it with the holy men.

I left my suitcases in the car when I parked the Jaguar on the upper slope of Lamar street, and made my way reluctantly into the pink Georgia marble-lined lobby of the Robert E. Lee hotel. The elevator boy, stalwart in his dark wine colored uniform, gave me a know-it-all smile when I got off at the fifth floor, but I couldn't smile back. For some reason, I was too nervous, too overwrought at leaving Matt and mama to be pleasant to anyone, least of all a total stranger. I went down the soft carpeted hallway, soundless, as if in a nightmare, and stood for a brief, tense moment before the door marked 505. I knocked.

"Come in," came a deep, hollow voice... like the voice of God to Moses on the mountain.

I opened the door reluctantly and stepped quietly into the foyer. It was semi-dark, and the gloom fell around me like the dimness of a cave. A silk-shaded lamp burned dimly beside the bed and

beyond its glow, in the hazy outline of the illumination, daddy slumped wearily in a big emerald green chair. At the sight of me he got up and came across the room to where I stood.

"Daddy."

"Bebe."

"I got your note."

"Have a seat," he suggested mannerly, but timidly, motioning to a chair which sat opposite the one in which he had been sitting. "It's not home, impersonal really, but it will suffice . . . please, sit down."

He embraced me warmly, as though we had not seen each other in years, and his eyes, red-rimmed from weeping, glowing frightfully through the semi-darkness.

I sat down and he took the chair in front of me. We were silent for a paralyzing moment, as if we had nothing to say . . . just sat there gazing at each other, lost somehow in this alien enviroment.

"Daddy . . . I . . . I was intending to leave home," I finally blurted out, as I gathered my senses. "To come live with you, but . . . "

"But . . . what, Bebe?" he questioned, leaning forward in his chair.

"Well, mama . . . "

"How is Carlotta?"

I shook my head slowly. "Not good."

He hung his head.

"I suppose she took our leaving hard."

"Yes," I stammered. "It's slowly killing her."

"I just couldn't go on," he said, his dark head still bowed, his voice choked on tears. "After Barry . . . her making life hell both day and night . . . I just couldn't live in that house one more night, knowing he was gone and with him my last spark of hope."

I looked at him and, though I felt a tinge of pity for him, I also sensed something within me of rejection. He was weak, and I saw this weakness for the first time, in applying it with my own loss, my own grief.

"I've lost Deke, too," I said, and there was a shade of coldness in my low voice, a voice muffled in this subdued room leveled high above the noisy streets. "We've both lost."

He looked up quickly then, and his face, lit solemnly by the dim light and the soft illumination sifting in through the blinds, had about it a tragic aspect. The silver streams down each side of his face added immensely to his soulful expression, a face demented with his own loss of Barry, and not for my loss of Deke, and suddenly I wanted to shout at him, to awaken him from his stupor, to tell him that I was as grieved as he, but had not given up, that I still had a life to lead, regardless of my star-crossed love.

"We'll make out, Bebe, you and me," he said, sniffing. He bowed his head again, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands entwined. "I've got plenty of money. We'll make a fresh start, go away somewhere, to a new town, to a new state, Louisiana maybe, or Texas. You'd like Texas, Bebe, the climate, good riding horses."

"What about mama?" I asked abruptly.

"There will be plenty for her. She can have Mock Orange Hollow, the stables. I no longer want them. And I'll leave enough money in the bank at Brandon for her and Matt to live on."

I spoke with firmness.

"I mean . . . her feelings. Us both leaving. What about the way we are hurting her?"

"Bebe," he answered, his voice muffled, engulfed with broken sobs. "If I thought she cared one tiny bit for me I'd think differently about all this. But she don't. She never has."

"You are wrong," I cried, leaning over him. "Mama loves you. I know that now. She wants you back."

"No!" he said, shaking his head, his dark curls falling recklessly. "Once maybe, but not any more, not since she found out about Barry and me." He stopped talking for a moment, choked, as if to catch his breath, then went on. "I know I've always loved you too much, loved Barry too much, the same as

he loved Deke too much. We just couldn't help it, Bebe. Since we couldn't see each other any more, naturally we turned to you and to Deke. It was a kind of reprieve, or an afterglow. What we felt for each other we lavished on you and on Deke. That's why Barry killed himself. He knew that without Deke he would have nothing ever to live for, to look forward too. Just like me with you, Bebe. That's why I left the note, so that you would follow after me, and we could begin again somehow. You are Barry and my son rolled into one . . . and I need you now, to stay with me, to help me keep my mind, my heart intact."

Looking at him there beside me, his dark head bowed, his shoulders stooped, shaking, listening to his voice, his choking sobs, I suddenly realized painfully what it would be like living with him . . . without mama. A helpless child, a man who had never matured, and would never mature really, and I saw him not as a father, the man I loved and needed desperately, but a stumbling, nuisance, a burden which would be on my shoulders as long as he lived, relying on me for the affection he had been robbed of in Barry.

Suddenly, as if shackles fell away from me, and I was free, free at last. I saw my obligation, to myself, to my parents, read in my own mind what I must say, had to say.

I studied him there in the twilight gloom, saw him really for the first time, the man behind the parent, the male behind the father, the man as a man, and not with any parental link with me, alien to my love of him, my need for him as a father, a tutor, a guide.

"I'm not going with you, daddy," I said, and with more strength to my voice than I felt within.

He jumped.

"What?"

"I'm not going with you," I repeated. "I just came up here to take you home . . . to mama."

"Oh, God, Bebe! What are you saying?"

"Daddy," I began, all of a sudden finding words, discovering my medium, as water will seek its own level. "I loved Deke very much, as much I suppose as one human being can love another and remain sane. Now that he is dead, is gone from me forever, I can live on the memory of it. I know there will never be another one like him, and I know I will never have an affair with another man as long as I live. I know this now profoundly. Deke was the one in a lifetime, something that happened to me, a thing which happens to some men once in their lifetime, to most never. It will never happen to me again. It is this same thing with you and Barry. You will never bring yourself to care for another man, though you do not know that now. But you

will come to know it in time. You altered your love of Barry to suit your love for me, just as Barry altered his for Deke. I want you to care for me as a father, and not as an echo out of your love for Barry. Like Deke, Barry is dead, and he will always be dead, and you've got to realize this, though painful it is. You've got to realize that you are going to have to go on and live without him, and without me, in part. For someday I intend to marry, to have sons of my own. I won't be with you always."

He nodded his head very slowly, as if drinking into his being, his soul, his heart everything I had said.

"Yes, Bebe," he whispered, looking up at me, his eyes strange with a new, sparkling light. "You are right. I knew it the minute they found Barry in Hoover lake, knew it though I didn't want to accept it. That's why I clung to you, why I wanted you to come with me, live in my presence. I just couldn't see it all vanish and leaving me nothing. In my emotional set-back over Barry, I've become streaked, variegated, all of a mixture of many selves. The colors in me have run. I guess it is time that you and I loved like men."

"It isn't natural," I added, thinking more clearly on my own life now than ever before that I could remember. "Not that I think it is morally wrong. I do not. For what are morals anyway? Who is to

gauge them? But in this society, this section of the south which is teaming with sex, the impulsive love of the opposite sex, the urge to marry, have children, this love of man for man is not a thing which will last. It can't last, for it was not intended to last. Sooner or later Deke and I would have split. And you and Barry would have, had you not gotten married to mama and he to Vilma, and kept hanging on to your love for each other. Someday," I surmised thoughtfully, "maybe it will last. But not now. It's impossible. We are doomed and condemned and damned from the start. We are pointed out on the streets, made the butt of ill timed jokes, ridiculed, and sneered at. There is no place that we can go and hide and live out the burning energy of such a love. We cannot live together with a lover because the law will evict us, and if not the law then the people who are our neighbors. Deke and I had to slip around, on our guard every second, an underworld existence, just no doubt as you and Barry had to do. There is no coming to the surface and breathing the same air as the normals breathe, or feeling the same sunshine upon your face as they feel. Its all underground, sodden, desperate, violent . . . and look at us, look at Deke and me . . . what has it brought us, how have we gained? Shame, unhappiness, his death, and now breaking you and mama up, our home split, you here in a hotel, her at home

alone, grieving out her heart. Love isn't worth that, daddy, no love, no kind of love. That kind of love is a dark dream and, now that Deke is dead, I want out of it. I want to be free. I want to walk down a street and not be pointed at, to be laughed at. In this kind of love, we can exist only in that world around us which exists, that narrow, hemmed in world, without air, without light. Loving Deke, even as much as I loved him, sometimes I would look away toward that other life, that so called normal life, and I would see it there quivering like a golden thread, and I could feel the rush of the wind as I desired to leap back into it."

"It's like that purple flame," he said lowly, almost in a whisper, his gleaming eyes looking, not at me, not at this room, but far away somewhere where I could not see, into some other time, some other existence.

"I don't understand," I cried, completely puzzled by his haunting voice, his terribly lost gaze.

"From an old story about Derbyshire," he continued gravely. "It was in winter and the King there ordered the river, which was frozen, to be swept clean and made into a carnival-like park. There, the intellectuals, the angry young men, the mixed people, the exiles, the people like us built bonfires on the river ice. The wood was frozen and they salted it down so that the flames would burn purple and green

instead of the usual, normal red. So, that's what we are, living beneath Apollo's loins, the purple flames amidst the red."

"Artificial," I tried to sum it up. "And it is time we came back to the reality of things, time we went home . . . to mama . . . live like she wants us to live, the right way to live."

"She wouldn't have me now. She's too proud, too vain."

"You are wrong, daddy," I said kindly, though firmly. "She loves us both, loves us so much until she has turned against her God. She thinks now that she has been wrong all along, and that you and I have been right. But mama isn't wrong. She is right, and she has been right all this time and I was too much of a fool to see it. That is why we must go back. For she needs us, as we both need her."

"Yes, she is right," was all he said, standing then, lifting himself to his full dignity.

I helped him pack, my nervous, excited fingers mingling with his, as we tossed into his morocco suitcase, socks, shirts, underwear, several sports coats, ties, handkerchiefs.

Once down on the street, out of the hotel, out of this bad dream forever, we hurried down the sidewalk to the waiting Jaguar. Amidst the crowd we passed two men, girlishly thin, each with a tiny poodle on a leash. Their eyes stared us down, locked on

our every move, those eyes like you see on theatrical mannikins in shop windows, glassy, hypnotic, and their gestures, extended arms, limp wrists, their swagger, their obvious caprice, was decidedly feminine, and their essence of nature was not lost on me, or daddy, and seemed, in the shining glory of our new life, our new role, the brash echoes of ourselves, the sequined afterglow of what we once were, but would never be again.

Daddy, glancing over his shoulder, gave me a smile, and the knowingness of that smile, went to my heart.

* * *

Epilogue

When we arrived at Mock Orange Hollow we could not find mama anywhere, though we searched frantically through every room in the house, then the grounds.

Finally, from the upstairs hallway, we spied old Matt coming up the field lane from her little shack. We met her halfway between the paddocks and the house, her out of breath, for she had seen us as well and had hurried as fast as her enormous body could gyrate.

"Yo all come back to stay?" she asked, crying hysterically as she hobbled up the path to us.

Daddy told her that we had.

"De Lord is on our side at last," she sobbed openly, as daddy embraced her.

"Where's mama?" I cried, for fear, uncertainty pricked my heart at not finding her at home, sitting primly in the library in her favorite chair, the family Bible in her lap.

"Her stayin' at de banjo cabin," she answered, grief stricken. "Ben da ever since yo went away."

"But why?" questioned daddy, looking as terrified as I. "Carlotta despised the place, never went there."

"She says," old Matt whimpered, her huge rolling eyes imploringly on ours. "She says she go da to finds herself . . . whutever dat means."

An hour later daddy and I, in the same little boat in which Deke and I always rode, the same one in which Barry had drowned, moored in at the wharf, the lavender heads of the pickerel weed like the plumes on the headgear of mythological heroes waving around the boat.

We hurried up the sandy lane, under the Stygian maze of live oak and moss, where, even at high noon the denseness has the haunt of dusk, and to the little Banjo cabin.

The eyes of the windows stared out of the immensity like the soul of someone already dead, the cabin itself looked so lost, so forlorn, that, as we approached it terror froze my heart, and a premonition of deep dread seeped into every fiber of my being.

Mama! What had happened to mama?

Then, I saw her. She came out of the cabin, slowly at first, then a moment more and she was bounding down the steps, running across the patch of sand toward us. We met her in a wild embrace, daddy and I hugging her all at once, and we sank in the soft sand, groping, clinging to one another: together at last.

"I've been wrong, Walter . . . so wrong!" she gasped, as he kissed her frantically on the cheek, then the mouth.

"Hush . . . hush," he murmured, the sound of his voice like a silver trumpet out of the blue. "You've been right. And I've been a stupid fool."

"Oh, Walter, I had to come here, when you and Bebe left," she cried, the wild sound of her voice filled with old, haunting echoes. "Had to come back here . . . where it all began . . . had to go back with my mind, my heart, to when it all happened . . . remember?"

"Yes . . . yes, sweetheart," he said, trying to soothe her, as they floundered in an old agony, a

tale of a long time passed, and must be relived again so that it could die . . . truly die. "But it's over now . . . over. Bebe and I have come home . . . to stay."

"Oh, my baby!" she cried as she pulled me to her and kissed me lovingly, her hot tears wetting my cheek.

We rose then, arm in arm, in her new Jerusalem, and went into the cabin. There, daddy hurriedly built a fire in the sooty hearth and we cooked a hearty meal.

Mama looked almost girlish then, the firelight playing on her face, her long hair hanging loose.

Her and daddy giggled foolishly, like high school kids out on a lark, too excited over their reunion to talk things out seriously. That would come later . . . much later when they had caught up on their love.

I sat on the old cowhide sofa and marveled at their attitudes, the way when daddy burned his finger on the hot skillet and mama kissing it lovingly, and their snuggling up to each other. How handsome they were in their new found love, their faces radiant, their eyes glowing hotly, bedazzled as untried youth, with me completely forgotten, momentarily, so lost they were in each other.

So when the meal was finished, in order to leave them alone in the little cabin, I went outside and

in the darkness strolled the sandy beach. The killdeers were out, shrieking maddeningly as they fought for choice worms in the moist sand, and plovers swarmed in groves over the golden heather which shimmered like ocean waves in the wind, in the luminous moonlight.

I walked, listening to the sounds of night, content in my solemnity, my aloneness, which I would take with me all the years of my life: listened to the low slosh of the waves along the wharf, the honking of horns in that far off civilized world, the crickets which kept up their revelry, and the haunting cry of frogs begging for more rain in their eternal ritual with nature.

The chorus of tiny life, beyond the reach of the eyes, singing their songs of night, the quadrille of little furry things beneath leaf and blossom, beneath toadstool and root, brought on a heavily laden peace. Through the haunting lyricism of this I saw truly, profoundly where the androgynous theme leads . . . as it led me and Deke, beguiled us onto the enchantment of fairy.

Suddenly some strange ecstasy came over me. I possessed some wild notion I had then of following the birds, these sounds, to the end of the world and there, flinging myself upon the soft sand to drink forgetfulness.

And when I had done so, lying upon my back in the quivering heather, with the lapping of the waters to sing me out of my loneliness, and the golden glow of the oil lamp in the cabin window to bring me saffron peace, and the moon to light my world, my thoughts, cleansing my heart, like a lantern perched on the edge of eternity, I whispered forlornly, but gratefully at last...

"Good-bye, Deke, good-bye"

THE END

PEC PAPERBACKS
THE HOTTEST-SELLING BOOKS IN ADULT FICTION!

SINGLE COPY SALES: Cover price plus 15c, postage prepaid. OR, any six (6) 75c novels for $4.00, postage prepaid. Or, any six (6) 95c novels for $5.00, postage prepaid.

SPECIAL OFFER: Ten (10) assorted 75c, 95c & $1.25 novels from our best-seller list . . . $8.00 complete, postage prepaid.

NOVELS

- ☐ N-132 NYMPHO WIDOW, by Eve Linkletter 95c
- ☐ N-133 FLESH TRAP, by Jack Love 95c
- ☐ N-134 PASSION PAY OFF, by Mel Frank 95c
- ☐ N-135 SEX-A-REENOS, by Vin Saxon 95c
- ☐ N-136 WANTON WEB, by Dave King 95c
- ☐ N-137 PAGAN LESBIANS, by Vin Saxon 95c
- ☐ N-138 THE GAY SINNERS, by Frank Shields 95c
- ☐ N-139 PLAYGIRL'S STUD, by Donald Franklin 95c
- ☐ N-140 DRIVE-IN HUSTLER, by Toni Wray 95c
- ☐ N-141 DIME A DANCE HUSTLER, by E. Linkletter ..95c
- ☐ N-142 SEX MADNESS, by Dave King 95c
- ☐ N-143 THE HYPNOTIST, by Jack Kahler 95c
- ☐ N-144 NYMPHO, by Eve Linkletter 95c
- ☐ N-145 BIKINI GIRL, by Jay West 95c
- ☐ N-146 NEON JUNGLE, by J. D. Blake 95c
- ☐ N-147 PASSION CLUB, by J. D. Blake 95c
- ☐ N-148 DARK PASSION, by Coley Adams 95c
- ☐ N-149 PUSSYCAT CASINO, by Wes Fields 95c
- ☐ N-150 RESORT STUD, by Ray Wilde 95c
- ☐ N-151 MAKING OF SUSAN, by Julia Rowe 95c
- ☐ N-152 FARM DOLLS, by T. R. Young 95c
- ☐ N-153 THE RAPIST, by Jeff Hart 95c
- ☐ N-154 I'VE GOT A THING FOR HIM, by R. Wilde .95c

☐ N-155 GIRLS IN BONDAGE, by Patrice Carol 95c
☐ N-156 MISTRESS OF SATAN'S ROOST, by J. Kahler 95c
☐ N-157 DIE, BABY, DIE, by Ray Wilde 95c
☐ N-158 STAG STAR, by Nina Sands 95c
☐ N-159 MY SISTER'S KEYHOLE, by Jack Kahler ...95c
☐ N-160 SWAP PICNIC, by Rex Weldon 95c
☐ N-161 BLACKMAIL BITCH, by Ray Wilde 95c
☐ N-162 MERRY-GO-ROUND SEX, by Ray Wilde ...95c

GIANTS

☐ G-1100 MY SON, MY LOVER, by Anonymous 95c
☐ G-1101 PSYCHO SIN, by Julie Rowe 95c
☐ G-1102 STUD FARM, by Ray Wilde 95c
☐ G-1103 SATAN WAS A LESBIAN, by Fred Haley ..95c
☐ G-1104 LEZLIE, by Anita Wright 95c
☐ G-1105 ROMAN ORGY, by L. C. Augustus 95c
☐ G-1106 SEX ALLEY, by Ron Gold 95c
☐ G-1107 SWAP VICTIM, by Toni Wray 95c
☐ G-1108 LESBIAN STRIPPERS, by Vin Saxon 95c
☐ G-1109 FRENCH CIRCUS, by Helene Andre 95c
☐ G-1110 PASSION POOL, by Rex Weldon 95c
☐ G-1111 NYMPHO NURSE, by M. X. Morgon 95c
☐ G-1112 TORMENTED GENERATION, by J. Commings 95c
☐ G-1113 CONFESSIONS OF A STARLET, by W. Oloveti 95c
☐ G-1114 WOMAN OF DARKNESS, by Monica Roberts 95c
☐ G-1115 THE PASSIONATE JUNGLE, by V. Ainsworth 95c

☐ G-1116 THE BI-SEXUALS, by Ruth Lambert 95c
☐ G-1117 RUBBER DOLLY, by Jack Kahler 95c
☐ G-1118 SPOTLIGHT SEX, by D. Franklin 95c
☐ G-1119 SIN-E-MA SCANDAL, by Anita Wright ...95c
☐ G-1120 KING OF SPORTS, by Fred L. Davis 95c
☐ G-1121 HOLLYWOOD STUD, by J. D. Blake 95c
☐ G-1122 DELTA MISTRESS, by T. R. Young 95c
☐ G-1123 DISCIPLE OF DE SADE, by J. Baxter 95c
☐ G-1124 CONTRACTS FOR SWAPPING, by G. Joseph 95c

FRENCH LINE

☐ FL-1 MY PURPLE WINTER, by Carl Corley 95c
☐ FL-2 RETURN TO LESBOS, by Ann Toward 95c
☐ FL-3 SCARLET LANTERN, by Carl Corley 95c
☐ FL-4 LESBIAN JUNGLE, by Vicki Evans 95c
☐ FL-5 WHISPER OF SILK, by Vin Saxon 95c
☐ FL-6 HOLLYWOOD GIRL TRAP, by Anita Wright ..95c
☐ FL-7 SEX SALON, by Julie Rowe 95c
☐ FL-8 CELL BLOCK SEX, by Toni Wray 95c
☐ FL-9 A FOOL'S ADVICE, by Carl Corley 95c
☐ FL-10 RUN, LEZ, RUN, by Dave King 95c
☐ FL-11 FALLEN EAGLE, by Carl Corley 95c
☐ FL-12 SCARS OF LUST, by James Harvey 95c
☐ FL-13 STRIPPER DYKE, by Anita Wright 95c
☐ FL-14 MALE MODEL, by Win Haven 95c
☐ FL-15 HOLLYWOOD HOMO, by Michael Starr ..1.25
☐ FL-16 TWO WAY STREET, by Rita Wilde 95c
☐ FL-17 BRAZEN IMAGE, by Carl Corley 1.25
☐ FL-18 OLGA, by Nita Wright 95c

HUMAN EXPERIENCE SERIES

- ☐ HES-101 FACES IN SECRET, by Carl Corley .....
- ☐ HES-102 LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON, by Dennis Drew
- ☐ HES-103 I THEE WED, by Jory Sherman .....
- ☐ HES-104 COLOR IT WILD, by Mikki Turner .....
- ☐ HES-105 TRANSVESTITE, by Charles Sachs .....
- ☐ HES-106 THE ARTIST, by Jack West .....

RAPTURE NOVELS

- ☐ R-201 CAGED LUST, by Vin Saxon .....
- ☐ R-202 SEX SPA, by Ray Wilde .....
- ☐ R-203 YOUNG STUD, by Wes Wilde .....
- ☐ R-204 ANIMAL LUST, by Vin Saxon .....
- ☐ R-205 FLESH FOCUS, by Michael Starr .....
- ☐ R-206 SEX MACHINE, by Dan Elliott .....
- ☐ R-207 HUNGRY VIRGIN, by Rex Waldon .....
- ☐ R-208 UNCHARTERED LUST, by Bill Russo .....

MAIL ORDER TO: SPECIALTY BOOK SERVICE
P. O. BOX 3223, Fletcher Hills
El Cajon, California 92020

Be sure to include name, age and address

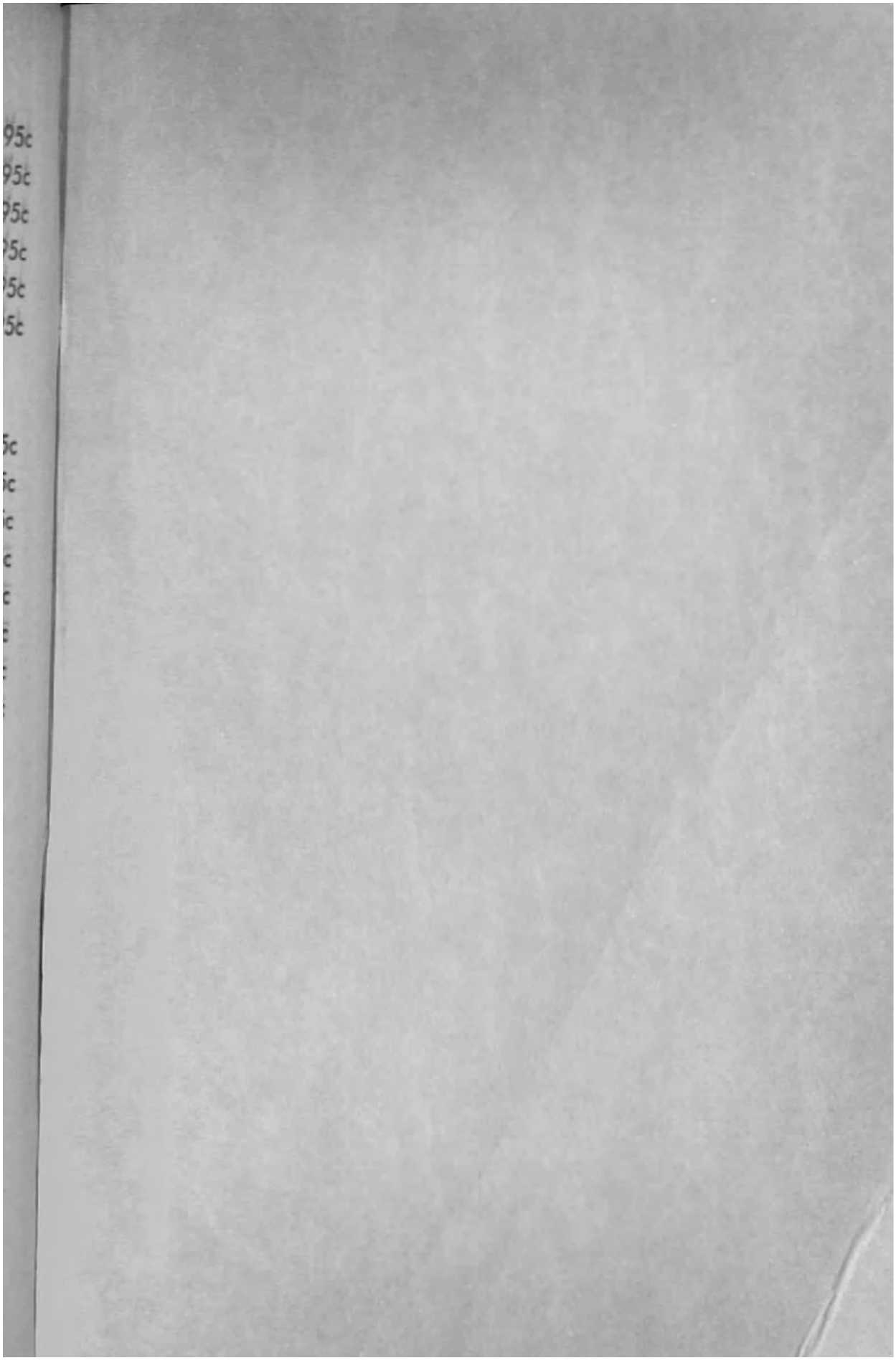
SORRY, NO COD ORDERS ACCEPTED

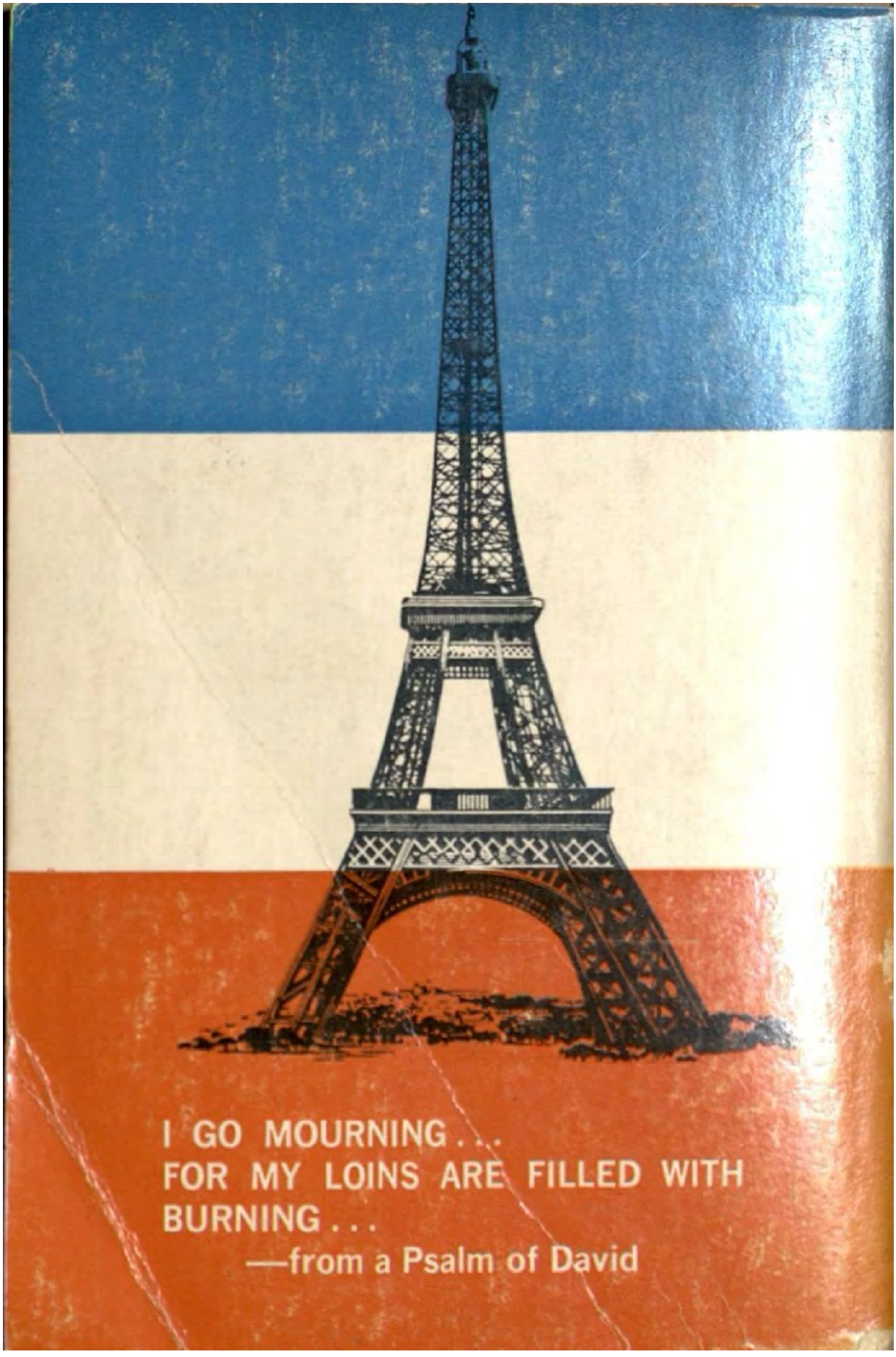
NAME ..... AGE .....

STREET .....

CITY ..... STATE ..... ZIP .....

Please Print





I GO MOURNING . . .
FOR MY LOINS ARE FILLED WITH
BURNING . . .
—from a Psalm of David